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U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

THE ADVISORY & COMBAT ASSISTANCE ERA

1954-1964

HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS WASHINGTON, D.C.

U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM

THE ADVISORY & COMBAT ASSISTANCE ERA

1954-1964

by

Captain Robert H. Whitlow, USMCR

DIRECTOR MARINE CORPS RESEARCH CENTER
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Library of Congress Card No. 76-600051

PCN 190 003064 00

For Sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington, D.C. 20402 (Buckram)

Stock Number 008-055-00094-7

Foreword

This is the first of a series of nine chronological histories being prepared by the Marine Corps History and Museums Division to cover the entire span of Marine Corps involvement in the Vietnam conflict. This particular volume covers a relatively obscure chapter in U.S. Marine Corps history—the activities of Marines in Vietnam between 1954 and 1964. The narrative traces the evolution of those activities from a one-man advisory operation at the conclusion of the French-Indochina War in 1954 to the advisory and combat support activities of some 700 Marines at the end of 1964. As the introductory volume for the series this account has an important secondary objective: to establish a geographical, political, and military foundation upon which the subsequent histories can be developed.

The author is a Marine Reservist who was a member of the History and Museums Division from September 1972 until August 1974. Promoted to major soon after his return to inactive duty, he is now working for the Kentucky State Government. A native of Kentucky, he holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Morehead State College (1965) and a Master of Arts degree in American History from the University of Kentucky (1972). Commissioned in 1965, Major Whitlow served as an infantry platoon commander with the 6th Marines, an aerial observer with the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam, and later as a platoon commander at Officer Candidate School, Quantico. For services in the Republic of Vietnam during 1967 and 1968 he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and 26 awards of the Air Medal.

E. H. SIMMONS
Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Reviewed and Approved:
15 September 1976

Preface

U.S. Marines in Vietnam, 1954–1964 is a narrative account of the initial decade of Marine Corps operations in South Vietnam. The monograph had two immediate forerunners, both classified studies prepared in the middle 1960s by the former Historical Branch, G–3 Division, Headquarters Marine Corps. Authored by Major James M. Yingling, Captain Harvey D. Bradshaw, and Mr. Benis M. Frank, the first of these was entitled "United States Marine Corps Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1963." The second, entitled "United States Marine Corps Operations in the Republic of Vietnam, 1964," was authored by Major Harvey D. Bradshaw. Although unpublished, these studies served as important sources for the material contained in this text. Otherwise, this history has been derived from official Marine Corps records, the Oral History Collection of the History and Museums Division, the comment files of the division, and appropriate historical works. Of particular value in its compilation have been the command diaries of the various Marine organizations involved.

Unfortunately, few official documents relative to either the early Marine advisory program or to the early operations of the Vietnamese Marine Corps still exist. Therefore, that portion of the text which deals with those areas has been reconstructed from interviews with various former Marine advisors. Even their generous assistance, however, has not completely overcome the dearth of documentary sources. Any reader possessing a knowledge of this period and subject is invited to submit pertinent comments to the History and Museums Division.

This monograph has not been the product of a single individual's labor. A comment draft of the manuscript was reviewed by over 40 persons, most of whom were directly associated with the described events. (A list of these contributors appears as Appendix E.) Their remarks have been of immense value in reconstructing with accuracy the origin, nature, and scope of the various Marine operations. The manuscript was prepared under the editorial direction of Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian of the History and Museums Division. Final editing and the preparation of the index was done by Mr. Charles R. Smith of the Historical Branch. Miss Kay P. Sue, editorial clerk and manuscript typist for the division, performed valuable services in typing and proof reading both the comment and final drafts. Staff Sergeant Paul A. Lloyd and Sergeant Eric A. Clark, also members of the History and Museums Division, were responsible for preparing all maps and charts. Unless otherwise credited, photographs are from official Marine Corps files.

ROBERT H. WHITLOW
Captain, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

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PART I
THE WATERSHED

CHAPTER 1

Background to Military Assistance

The Geographic Setting—The People—Vietnam's Recent History—Post-Geneva South Vietnam—The American Response

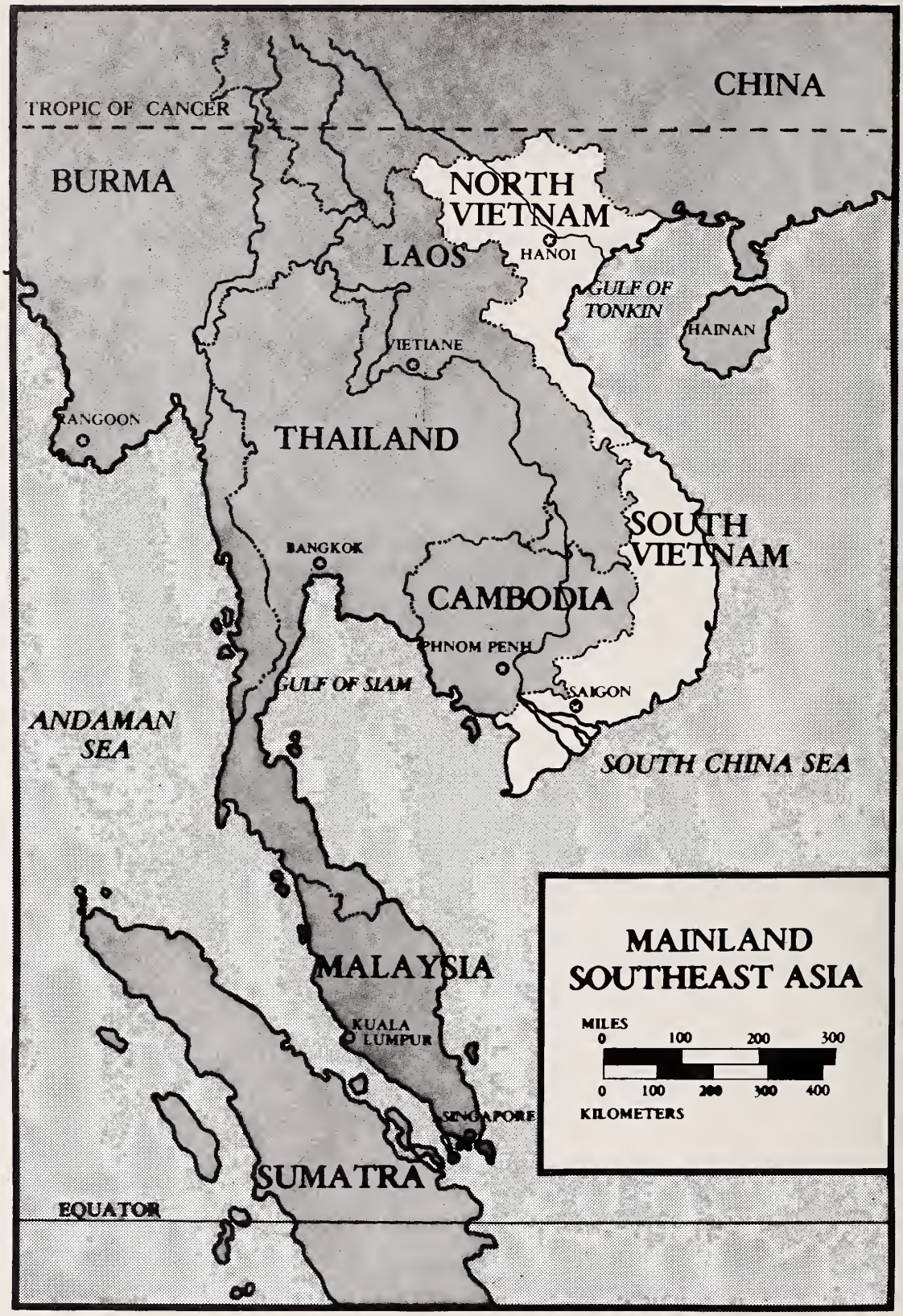
The Geographic Setting

Hanging like a bulbous pendant from China's southern border, the Southeast Asian land mass projects itself southward to within 100 miles of the equator. Often referred to as the Indochinese Peninsula, this land mass is contained by the Andaman Sea on the west, the Gulf of Siam on the south, and the South China Sea and the Tonkin Gulf on the east. Along with the extensive Indonesian island chain which lies to the immediate south, mainland Southeast Asia dominates the key water routes between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. So positioned, the Indochinese Peninsula and the offshore islands resemble the Middle East in that they traditionally have been recognized as a "crossroads of commerce and history." [1]

Seven sovereign states currently make up the Indochinese Peninsula. Burma and Thailand occupy what is roughly the western two-thirds of the entire peninsula. To the south, the Moslem state of Malaysia occupies the southern third of the rugged, southward-reaching Malaysian Peninsula. East of Thailand lies Cambodia, which possesses a relatively abbreviated coastline on the Gulf of Siam, and Laos, a landlocked country. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), which borders to the north on China, and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) form the eastern rim of the Indochinese Peninsula.

Vietnamese have often described the area currently administered by the two separate Vietnamese states as resembling "two rice baskets at the ends of their carrying poles." [2] This description is derived from the position of extensive rice producing river deltas at the northern and southern extremities of the long, narrow expanse of coastline and adjacent mountains. Vietnamese civilization originated in the northernmost of these so-called "rice baskets," the Red River Delta, centuries before the birth of Christ. Pressured at various stages in their history by the vastly more powerful Chinese and by increasingly crowded conditions in the Red River Delta, the Vietnamese gradually pushed southward down the narrow coastal plain in search of new rice lands. Eventually their migration displaced several rival cultures and carried them into every arable corner of the Mekong Delta, the more extensive river delta located at the southern end of the proverbial "carrying pole." Although unified since the eighteenth century under the Vietnamese, the area between the Chinese border and the Gulf of Siam came to be divided into three more or less different regions: Tonkin, centered on the Red River Delta; Cochinchina, centered on the Mekong Delta; and Annam, the intervening coastal region.

Since mid-1954 the area known collectively as Vietnam has been divided into northern and southern states. South Vietnam (known after 1956 as the Republic of Vietnam), where the earliest U.S. military activities were focused, came to include all of former Cochinchina and the southern half of Annam. The geography of this small state, described in general terms, is rugged and difficult. The lengthy country shares often ill-defined jungle boundaries with Laos and Cambodia in the west and with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to the north. Its land borders total almost 1,000 miles—600 with Cambodia, 300 with Laos, and roughly 40 with North Vietnam. Approxi-


CHINA
TROPIC OF CANCER
BURMA
NORTH VIETNAM
HANOI
LAOS
GULF OF TONKIN
HAINAN
VIETIANE
RANGOON
THAILAND
SOUTH VIETNAM
BANGKOK
CAMBODIA
PHNOM PENH
GULF OF SIAM
SAIGON
ANDAMAN SEA
SOUTH CHINA SEA
MALAYSIA
KUALA LUMPUR
SINGAPORE
SUMATRA
EQUATOR
MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA
MILES
0 100 200 300
0 100 200 300 400
KILOMETERS

CHINA
TONKIN
Red River
HANOI
GULF OF TONKIN
HAINAN
LAOS
VIENTIANE
Mekong River
SOUTH CHINA SEA
HUE
THAILAND
BANGKOK
ANNAM
CAMBODIA
GULF OF SIAM
PHNOM PENH
COCHIN CHINA
SAIGON
FRENCH INDOCHINA
1954
MILES
0 25 50 75 100 125
0 25 75 125
KILOMETERS

mately 1,500 miles of irregular coastline on the Tonkin Gulf and the South China Sea complete the enclosure of its 66,000-square mile area.

South Vietnam is divided into four relatively distinct physiographic regions—the Mekong Delta, the coastal plain, the Annamite Mountains, and the forested plain. The Mekong Delta, an extensive and fertile lowland centered on the Mekong River, covers roughly the southern quarter of the country. This region is essentially a marshy flat land well suited for rice growing and is recognized as one of Asia's richest agricultural areas. South Vietnam's second physiographic region, the coastal plain, is similar to the Mekong Delta in that it is predominantly flat and generally well suited for rice growing. Properly known as the coastal lowland, this region extends from the country's northern border to the Mekong Delta. Its width is never constant, being defined on the west by the rugged Annamite Mountains—the region which dominates the northern two thirds of South Vietnam. The jungle-covered mountains, whose highest elevations measure over 8,000 feet, stand in sharp contrast to the low and flat coastal plain. The eastern slopes of the mountains normally rise from the lowlands at a distance of five or 10 miles from the sea. At several points along the coast, however, the emerald mountains crowd to the water's edge, dividing the coastal plain into compartments and creating a seascape breathtaking in its beauty. At other locations the mountain chain recedes from the coast, allowing the lowlands to extend inland as far as 40 miles. An extensive upland plateau sprawls over the central portion of South Vietnam's mountain region.

This important subregion, known as the Central Highlands, possesses relatively fertile soil and has great potential for agricultural development. The highest elevations in the Annamite chain are recorded south of the Central Highlands. From heights of 6,000 to 7,000 feet, the mountains dissolve southward into the forested plain, a hilly transition zone which forms a strip between the Mekong lowlands and the southernmost mountains.

South Vietnam lies entirely below the Tropic of Cancer. Its climate is best described as hot and humid. Because the country is situated within Southeast Asia's twin tropical monsoon belt, it experiences two distinct rainy seasons. The southwest (or summer) monsoon settles over the Mekong Delta and the southern part of the country in mid-May and lasts until early October. In the northern reaches, the northeast (or winter) monsoon season begins in November and continues through most of March. Unlike the rainy season in the south, fog, wind, and noticeably lower temperatures characterize the wet season in the north. While the reversed monsoon seasons provide an abundance of water for rice growing throughout the Mekong Delta and most of the long coastal plain, rainfall is not distributed uniformly. Parts of the central coast record only about 28 inches of annual precipitation. In contrast, other areas along the northern coast receive as much as 126 inches of rain during the course of a year. Even worse, a percentage of this rainfall can be expected to occur as a result of typhoons. The tropical storms usually lash the Annamese coast between July and November. Almost always they cause extensive flooding along normally sluggish rivers which dissect the coastal plain.

The People

Slightly over 16 million people currently inhabit South Vietnam. Of these, over 13 million are ethnic Vietnamese. Primarily rice farmers and fishermen, the Vietnamese have tended to compress themselves into the country's most productive agricultural areas—the Mekong Delta and the coastal plain. Chinese, numbering around one million, form South Vietnam's largest ethnic minority. Concentrated for the most part in the major cities, the Chinese traditionally have played a leading role in Vietnam's commerce. About 700,000 Montagnard tribesmen, scattered across the upland plateau and the rugged northern mountains, constitute South Vietnam's second largest minority. Some 400,000 Khmers, closely akin to the dominant population of Cambodia, inhabit the lowlands along the Cambodian border. Roughly 35,000 Chams, remnants of a once powerful kingdom that blocked the southern migration of the Vietnamese until the late 1400s, form the country's smallest and least influential ethnic minority. The Chams, whose ancestors once controlled most of the central and southern Annamese coast, are confined to a few small villages on the central coast near Phan Rang.

NORTH VIETNAM
THAILAND
LAOS
CAMBODIA
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Mekong River
Mekong River
SAIGON
N
TERRAIN FEATURES
SOUTH VIETNAM
COASTAL PLAINS
MOUNTAINS
MEKONG LOWLANDS
FORESTED PLAINS
MILES
0 25 50 75 100
0 25 50 75 100
KILOMETERS

South Vietnamese adhere to a broad range of religions. Between 70 and 80 percent of the country's 16 million people are classified as Buddhist. It is estimated, however, that a much smaller percentage are actually practitioners. Roman Catholics comprise roughly 10 percent of the total population. Usually found in and around the country's urban centers, the Catholics are products of Vietnam's contacts with Europeans. Two so-called politico-religious sects, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, have attracted large segments of the rural population, particularly in the Mekong Delta.* For the most part, the scattered Montagnard tribes worship animal forms and have no organized religion, although many have been converted to Christianity.

Fundamentally, South Vietnamese society is rural and agrarian. Over the centuries the Vietnamese have tended to cluster in tiny hamlets strewn down the coastal plain and across the Mekong Delta. Usually composed of a handful of closely knit families whose ancestors settled the surrounding land generations earlier, the hamlet is South Vietnam's basic community unit. Next larger is the village which resembles the American township in function in that it encompasses a number of adjacent hamlets. The Vietnamese people have naturally developed strong emotional ties with their native villages. "To the Vietnamese," it has been said without exaggeration, "the village is his land's heart, mind, and soul." [3] Given the rural nature of the country it is understandable that the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets have retained a large degree of self-government. "The laws of the emperor," states an ancient Vietnamese proverb, "are less than the customs of the village." [4]

Overlaying this rural mosaic are two intermediate governmental echelons—the districts and the provinces. The district, the smaller of these political and geographic subdivisions, first appeared in Vietnamese history following the earliest annexation of Tonkin by the Chinese in 111 B.C. It remained in use and was extended down the Annamese coast and into Cochinchina by the successive Vietnamese dynasties which came to power in the ensuing centuries. Provinces, larger geographic subdivisions, eventually were superimposed over groups of contiguous districts, thus adding another echelon between the reigning central government and the villages. This structure remained in existence under the French after they took control of all Vietnam in the late 19th century. In order to make their administration more efficient French colonial authorities modernized the cumbersome administrative machinery and adjusted provincial boundaries. It is essentially this French-influenced structure that exists in South Vietnam today. Still, after years of use and modification, the system seems somewhat superficial as traditional self-rule of the villages tends to nullify the efforts of provinces and districts to govern rural areas. Often the central government's influence is unable to seep lower than the district headquarters, particularly in more remote areas.

While South Vietnam is predominantly rural, it does possess several important urban centers. As might be expected, these are found primarily in the densely populated Mekong Delta and along the coastal lowland. Saigon, the nation's capital and largest city, presently has a population estimated at 3.5 million. Located slightly north of the Mekong River complex and inland from the coast, the city dominates the country in both an economic and political sense. Saigon has excellent port facilities for ocean-going ships, although such traffic must first negotiate the tangled Saigon River which leads inland from the South China Sea. Da Nang, located on the Annamese coast 84 miles below the northern border, is the country's second largest

*Founded just after World War I, the Cao Dai claims more than one and a half million faithful in South Vietnam. The religion incorporates elements of Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and large doses of spiritualism. Its clergy, headed by a "pope," is organized in a heirarchy modelled on that of the Roman Catholic Church. The extent of its borrowing is suggested by the fact that adherents count the French author Victor Hugo as one of their saints. Politically, the Cao Dai moved sharply in the direction of nationalism during the 1940s, organized its own army, and fought sporadic actions against the French and the subsequent French-controlled government of Emperor Bao Dai until suppressed by the Diem government in 1954.

Like the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao is peculiarly Vietnamese. In the late 1930s, a Buddhist monk named Huynh Pho So began a "protestant" movement within the worldly, easy-going Buddhist faith then prevalent. His followers, whose ranks grew rapidly, called themselves Hoa Hao after the village where Phu So began his crusade. Like the Cao Dai faithful and Catholics, they tended to live apart in their own villages and hamlets concentrated in the very south and west of Vietnam, primarily along the Cambodian border. Intensely nationalistic and xenophobic, they were under constant attack from the French, Japanese, and Viet Minh, and by the late 1940s had recruited a large militia which was subsequently disbanded. Today their overall membership stands at about one million.

city. With a population of roughly 500,000 and a protected harbor, Da Nang constitutes the principal economic center in northern South Vietnam. The old imperial capital of Hue (population of roughly 200,000), situated about 50 miles north of Da Nang, historically has exerted a strong cultural influence over the Annamese coast.* Scores of large towns, such as Quang Tri, Hoi An, Quang Ngai, Can Tho, and Vinh Long, extend down the coast and across the Mekong Delta. Often these serve as provincial capitals. A few lesser population centers, notably Pleiku, Kontum, and Ban Me Thuot, are situated in the Central Highlands.

Most of South Vietnam's major towns and cities are connected by one highway—Route 1. Constructed by the French during the early 20th century, Route 1 originally extended from Hanoi, the principal city of Tonkin in northern Vietnam, down the coast and inland to Saigon. While Route 1 and a French-built railroad which parallels it helped unify South Vietnam's most densely populated areas, the country's road network is otherwise underdeveloped. A few tortuous roads do twist westward from Route 1 into the mountains to reach the remote towns there. Of these the most noteworthy are Route 19, built to serve Pleiku in the Central Highlands, and Route 9, which extends westward into Laos from Dong Ha, South Vietnam's northernmost town. A number of roads radiate outward from Saigon to the population centers of the Mekong Delta. For the most part, however, the Vietnamese people traditionally have depended on trail networks, inland waterways, and the sea to satisfy their transportation needs. The location of the bulk of the population in the watery Mekong Delta and along the seacoast has encouraged their reliance on waterborne transportation.

Vietnam's Recent History

Prior to July 1954 the expanse of mainland Southeast Asia now occupied by South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia belonged to France. Together these possessions constituted French-Indochina over which the French had exercised political control in one form or another, with one exception, since the last quarter of the 19th century. The only interruption occurred following the capitulation of France in June 1940. Exploiting the disrupted power balance in Europe, and attracted by the natural resources and strategic value of the area, Japan moved into northern French-Indochina less than four months after France had fallen. In 1941 the Vichy French government agreed to Japanese occupation of southern French-Indochina. Soon Japanese forces controlled every airfield and major port in Indochina. Under this arrangement the Japanese permitted French colonial authorities to maintain their administrative responsibilities. But as the tide of war began to turn against the Japanese, the French became increasingly defiant. The Japanese terminated this relationship on 9 March 1945 when, without warning, they arrested colonial officials throughout Indochina and brutally seized control of all governmental functions.

Six months after the dissolution of the French colonial apparatus in Indochina, World War II ended. The grip which Japan had held on most of Southeast Asia for nearly half a decade was broken on 2 September 1945 when her foreign minister signed the instrument of unconditional surrender on board the battleship USS *Missouri*. Shortly thereafter, in accordance with a previously reached Allied agreement, Chinese Nationalist forces moved into Tonkin and northern Annam to accept the surrender of Japanese forces. South of the 16th parallel, British units arrived from India to disarm the defeated Japanese. A detachment of 150 men from a small French Expeditionary Corps arrived by air in Saigon on the 12th to assist the British, who had included them only as a courtesy since France was not among the powers slated to receive the surrender of the Japanese in Indochina.

But the end of World War II and the arrival of Allied forces did not end the struggle for control of French-Indochina. Instead, it signalled the beginning of a new conflict in which the contestants were, in many respects, more formidable. One of these, the French, moved quickly to restore their former presence in Cochinchina and Annam. Reinforced with additional units, they occupied most major towns between the Mekong Delta and the

*The population of most of South Vietnam's cities and towns has been swollen by the influx of refugees which occurred as the Vietnam War intensified in the middle 1960s. In 1965, for example, refugee population estimates for the three major cities were as follows: Saigon—1.5 million; Da Nang—144,000; Hue—105,000.

NORTH VIETNAM
QUANG TRI
RT 9
HUE
HAI VAN PENINSULA
DA NANG
HOI AN
SOUTH CHINA SEA
THAILAND
Mekong River
LAOS
QUANG NGAI
KONTUM
PLEIKU
RT 19
QUI NHON
CAMBODIA
RT 1 AND MAIN RAILWAY
BAN ME THOUT
Mekong River
NHA TRANG
PHAN RANG
N
LUAN THIET
SAIGON
MY THO
VUNG TAU
CAPE ST. JACQUES
VINH LONG
CAN THO
CA MAU
CA MAU PENINSULA
MAJOR CITIES OF SOUTH VIETNAM
MILES
0 25 50 75 100
0 25 50 75 100
KILOMETERS

16th parallel by the end of 1945. Two months later French negotiators secured an agreement with the Chinese Nationalists whereby French units would replace the Chinese occupation forces north of the 16th parallel.

Wartime developments in French-Indochina, however, had brought about profound political changes which eventually would doom the French effort to re-establish political and economic influence in the region. During World War II, Ho Chi Minh, an avowed Communist, had transformed a relatively feeble political party into a sizable guerrilla organization. Known as the Viet Minh, the Communist guerrillas had been organized, trained, and led by Vo Nguyen Giap, a former history teacher from Annam. During the latter stages of the war, the United States had supplied the Viet Minh with limited quantities of military supplies. In return, Ho's guerrillas had assisted downed American pilots and occasionally had clashed with small Japanese units. But the Viet Minh had wasted few men on costly major actions against the Japanese. Conserving their forces, Ho and Giap had concentrated on organization and had managed to extend their strength into the densely populated Red River Delta and along the Annamese coast. In Cochinchina, where their numbers were considerably smaller, the Communists had limited their activities almost entirely to organization and recruitment. Thus, by the end of the war Ho's organization was able to emerge as a definite military-political force in northern French-Indochina.

Following the Japanese surrender and before the arrival of the Chinese Nationalist occupation forces, the Viet Minh seized control of Hanoi, the capital of Tonkin, and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At Ho's direction the Viet Minh promptly shifted from their anti-Japanese posture and prepared to contest the French return.

Confronted with this situation in northern Indochina, the French were forced to bargain with the Communists. A preliminary agreement was reached on 6 March 1946 whereby the French agreed to recognize the newly founded but relatively weak Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a "free state within the French Union." In return, Ho's government declared itself "ready to welcome in friendly fashion the French Army, when in conformance with international agreement, it would relieve the Chinese forces" which had accepted the Japanese surrender in Tonkin.[5] Shortly after the conclusion of this agreement, French forces began reoccupying Tonkin and northern Annam. Within six months they controlled every major strategic position from the Chinese border to the Ca Mau Peninsula, Cochinchina's southern tip.

The uneasy peace was broken in December 1946 after Viet Minh and French negotiators failed to reach a final agreement on actual political control of Tonkin and Annam. When open warfare erupted, Ho withdrew the bulk of his military forces into mountainous sanctuaries along the Chinese border, but left small groups of guerrillas scattered throughout the heavily populated Red River Delta. Reinforced with contingents from Europe and Africa, the French Expeditionary Corps initially managed to hold its own and, in some cases, even extend its control. But, drawing strength from its natural appeal to Vietnamese nationalism, the Communist movement began gaining momentum in the late 1940s. Gradually the war intensified and spread into central Annam and Cochinchina.

In January 1950, the French moved to undercut the Viet Minh's appeal to non-Communist nationalists by granting nominal independence to its Indochina possessions. Under the terms of a formal treaty, all of Vietnam (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) was brought together under a Saigon-based government headed by Emperor Bao Dai. Laos and Cambodia likewise formed their own governments, whereupon all three countries became known as the Associated States of Indochina.

This new arrangement, however, had little effect on the ongoing war with the Viet Minh. In accordance with the treaties, the Associated States became members of the French Union and agreed to prosecute the war under French direction. Moreover, French political dominance in the region continued, virtually undiluted by the existence of the Associated States.

In related developments, Mao Tse-tung's Chinese Communist armies seized control of mainland China in 1949 and Communist North Korean forces invaded the pro-Western Republic of Korea in 1950. These events added new meaning to the French struggle in Indochina as American policy makers came to view the war on the Southeast Asian mainland within the context of a larger

design to bring Asia entirely under Communist domination. Following the invasion of South Korea, President Truman immediately announced his intention to step up U.S. military aid to the French in Indochina. Congress responded quickly by adding four billion dollars to existing military assistance funds. Of this, $303 million was earmarked for Korea, the Philippines, and "the general area of China."[6]* Thus, the Truman Administration, now confronted by the possibility that Communism might engulf all of mainland Asia, extended its containment policy to Indochina.

Even with rapidly increasing amounts of U.S. material assistance, the French proved unable to wrest the initiative from Giap's growing armies. Although national armies drawn from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were now fighting alongside the French, the Expeditionary Corps was overextended. Moreover, the French cause was extremely vulnerable to Communist propaganda. On the home front, public support for the so-called *sale guerre* (dirty war) eroded steadily during the early 1950s as the Expeditionary Corps' failures and casualties mounted. Finally, on 7 May 1954, the besieged 13,000-man French garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrendered to the Viet Minh, thus shattering what remained of French determination to prosecute the war in Indochina. In Geneva, where Communist and Free World diplomats had gathered to consider a formal peace in Korea along with the Indochina problem, French and Viet Minh representatives signed a cease-fire agreement on 20 July which ended the eight-year conflict.

The bilateral cease-fire agreement substantially altered the map of the Indochinese Peninsula. France agreed to relinquish political control throughout the area. Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam all gained full independence. The most controversial provision of the 20 July agreement divided Vietnam at the Ben Hai River and superimposed a demilitarized zone over the partition line. This division, intended to facilitate the disengagement of the opposing forces, was to be temporary pending a reunification election scheduled for mid-1956. In accordance with the agreement, France immediately turned over political control of the northern zone (Tonkin and the northern half of Annam) to the Communist Viet Minh. Ho promptly re-established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with its capital in Hanoi.

Other provisions of the Geneva Agreement called for the opposing armies to regroup in their respective zones within 300 days. Following their regroupment, the French military forces were to be completely withdrawn from the North within 300 days and from the South by mid-1956. Civilians living both north and south of the partition line were to be allowed to emigrate to the opposite zone in accordance with their political convictions. It was anticipated that thousands of Catholics living in Tonkin would seek refuge in the the non-Communist South. Other articles of the agreement dealt with the creation and responsibilities of an International Control Commission (ICC) to supervise the cease-fire. Canadian, Indian, and Polish delegations were to comprise this commission.

On 21 July, the day following the bilateral agreement, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the Peoples Republic of China, Cambodia, and Laos joined France and the Viet Minh in endorsing a "Final Declaration" which sanctioned the previously reached cease-fire agreement. The United States refused to endorse this declaration, but issued a statement to the effect that it would not use force to disturb the cease-fire.

Post-Geneva South Vietnam

The execution of the Geneva Agreement thrust that area of Vietnam south of the partition line into a period of profound confusion and instability. Even worse, the colonial period had done little to prepare the Cochinchinese and Annamese for the tremendous problems at hand. No real apparatus for central government existed. Likewise, the long colonial period left the area with few experienced political leaders capable of establishing and managing the required governmental machinery. Political control passed nominally to the French-sponsored emperor, Bao Dai, who was living in France at the time. For all practical purposes, leadership in the South devolved upon Bao Dai's recently appointed pro-Western premier, Ngo Dinh Diem. The product of a prosperous and well-educated Catholic family from Hue, Diem had served the French briefly as a province chief

*The following year would see a half billion U.S. dollars allocated to support French operations in Indochina. By 1954 that figure would climb to an even one billion dollars.

prior to World War II. Always a strong nationalist but staunchly anti-Communist, he had been unable to reconcile his anti-French attitudes with the Viet Minh movement during the Indochina War. As a result Diem had left his homeland in the early 1950s to live at a Catholic seminary in the United States. There he remained until his appointment as premier in mid-June of 1954.

The months immediately following the Geneva agreement found Ngo Dinh Diem struggling to create the necessary governmental machinery in Saigon, the capital of the southern zone. At best, however, his hold on the feeble institutions was tenuous. A serious confrontation was developing between the premier and the absent Bao Dai, still residing in France. Further complicating the political scene was the presence of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai armies in the provinces surrounding the capital, and the existence in Saigon of an underworld organization named the Binh Xuyen.* As 1955 opened the leaders of these three politically oriented factions were pressing demands for concessions from the new central government. Among these were permission to maintain their private armies, and the authority to exercise political control over large, heavily populated areas.

The outcome of the embryonic power struggle in Saigon hinged largely on control of the Vietnamese National Army (VNA). Although not considered an efficient military organization by even the most liberal estimates, the 210,000-man National Army was the principal source of organized power available to the quarreling leaders of southern Vietnam. Originally created by the French in 1950 to supplement their Expeditionary Corps, the VNA had since suffered from structural deficiencies. It actually had no organizational echelon between the French-controlled General Staff and the 160 separate battalions. Tied to no regiments or divisions, the Vietnamese battalions naturally were dependent on the French Expeditionary Corps for operational instructions and logistical support.** A dearth of qualified Vietnamese officers and a degree of inattention on the part of the French compounded the problems which stemmed from the army's structural flaw. Partially as a result of these shortcomings the morale of the VNA had deteriorated sharply in the waning stages of the French-Indochina War. At the time of the cease-fire agreement, high desertion rates were reported in almost every Vietnamese battalion. Still, it was evident that he who controlled the National Army would most likely control the government in the area south of the partition line.

The danger that the pro-Western zone might become the victim of a sudden Communist attack from the north, as had been the case on the Korean Peninsula, injected another element of uncertainty into the overall situation in southern Vietnam. The conditions which settled over the area in the immediate aftermath of the Geneva settlement suggested this possibility since they were alarmingly similar to the conditions which had prevailed in Korea prior to the North Korean invasion of 1950. Like Korea, Vietnam was divided both geographically and ideologically: the North clearly within the orbit of the Soviet Union and Communist China, and the South under the influence of the Western powers. As in Korea in 1950, there also existed a very real armed threat to the weaker pro-Western southern state. Immediately after the Geneva cease-fire, the Viet Minh army regrouped north of the 17th parallel and was redesignated the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). American intelligence reported that the PAVN, which numbered roughly 240,000 disciplined veterans, was being reorganized and re-equipped with Soviet and Chinese weapons in violation of the Geneva Agreement. At the same time Western intelligence sources estimated that the Viet Minh had intentionally left between 5,000 and 10,000 men south of the partition line following their withdrawal. Also done in violation of the cease-fire agreement, this meant that Communist guerrillas could be expected to surface throughout the South in the event of an outright invasion.

A related condition heightened fears that a Korea-type invasion might occur in Vietnam. In South Korea a military vacuum had been allowed to form in 1949 when American units withdrew from the area. Apparently that vacuum, coupled with a statement by the American Secretary of

*The Binh Xuyen originally operated from the swamps south of the Chinese-dominated Cholon district of Saigon. Controlling the vice and crime of the city, by 1954 they had gained control of the police under circumstances that reeked of bribery. A year later the organization was brutually crushed by Ngo Dinh Diem.

**Selected VNA battalions were sometimes task organized into *groupes mobiles* (mobile groups) by the French for specific offensive operations. But these groups, which were roughly equivalent to a regimental combat team, were never composed entirely of VNA battalions under a Vietnamese command group.

State to the effect that the U.S. defensive perimeter in the Pacific did not include South Korea, had encouraged Communist aggression. Now, with the scheduled evacuation of French armies from Indochina by mid-1956, there emerged the distinct possibility that such a military vacuum would recur, this time in southern Vietnam. "Vietnam," warned one American scholar familiar with the region, "may very soon become either a dam against aggression from the north or a bridge serving the communist block to transform the countries of the Indochinese peninsula into satellites of China." [7]

The American Response

It was in the face of this uncertain situation on the Southeast Asian mainland that the Eisenhower administration moved to discourage renewed Communist military activity. First, the United States sought to create a regional international organization to promote collective military action under the threat of aggression. This was obtained on 8 September 1954 when eight nations—the United States, Great Britain, France, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Thailand—signed the Manila Pact. The treaty area encompassed by the pact included Southeast Asia, the Southwest Pacific below 21°31′ north latitude, and Pakistan. Two weeks later the pact was transformed into the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). In a separate protocol, the member nations agreed that Cambodia, Laos, and the "Free Territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam" all resided within their defense sphere.[8]

Next, after several months of hesitation, the United States settled on a policy of comprehensive assistance to South Vietnam, as the area south of the 1954 partition line was already being called. As conceived, the immediate objective of the new American policy was to bring political stability to South Vietnam. The longer range goal was the creation of a bulwark to discourage renewed Communist expansion down the Indochinese Peninsula. In this scheme, military assistance was to play a key role. "One of the most efficient means of enabling the Vietnamese Government to become strong," explained Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, "is to assist it in reorganizing the National Army and in training that Army."[9] In short, the State Department's position was that a stronger, more responsive Vietnamese National Army would help Premier Diem consolidate his political power. Later that same force would serve as a shield behind which South Vietnam would attempt to recover from the ravages of the French-Indochina War and the after effects of the Geneva Agreement.

So by early 1955 a combination of circumstances—South Vietnam's position adjacent to a Communist state, the unsavory memories of the Korean invasion, and the impending withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps—had influenced the United States to adopt a policy of military support for Premier Diem's struggling government.

CHAPTER 2

The Formative Years

Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam—Origins of U.S. Marine Assistance—Political Stabilization and Its Effects—Reorganization and Progress—Summing Up Developments

Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam

When the Geneva cease-fire went into effect in the late summer of 1954, the machinery for implementing the military phase of the American assistance program for South Vietnam already existed. President Truman had ordered the establishment of a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (USMAAG or MAAG) in French Indochina in mid-1950 as one of several reactions to the North Korean invasion of the Republic of Korea. Established to provide materiel support to the French Expeditionary Corps, the MAAG constituted little more than a logistical funnel through which U.S. military aid had been poured.

Lieutenant General John M. ("Iron Mike") O'Daniel, U.S. Army, had been assigned to command the MAAG in the spring of 1954. O'Daniel's selection for the Saigon post anticipated a more active U.S. role in training of the Vietnamese National Army. He had been chosen for the assignment largely on the basis of his successful role in creating and supervising the training programs which had transformed the South Korean Army into an effective fighting force during the Korean War. Now, in the aftermath of the Geneva settlement, he and his 342-man group began preparing for the immense task of rebuilding South Vietnam's armed forces.

The entire American project to assist the South Vietnamese in the construction of a viable state was delayed during the fall of 1954 while the necessary diplomatic agreements were negotiated among American, French, and South Vietnamese officials. President Eisenhower dispatched General J. Lawton Collins, U.S. Army (Retired), to Saigon in November to complete the details of the triangular arrangements. Collins carried with him the broad powers which would be required to expedite the negotiations.

By mid-January 1955, the president's special envoy had paved the way for the transfer of responsibility for training, equipping, and advising the Vietnamese National Army from the French to the USMAAG. He and General Paul Ely, the officer appointed by the Paris government to oversee the French withdrawal from Indochina, had initialed a "Minute of Understanding." In accordance with this document, the United States agreed to provide financial assistance to the French military in Vietnam in exchange for two important concessions. First, the French pledged to conduct a gradual military withdrawal from South Vietnam in order to prevent the development of a military vacuum which might precipitate a North Vietnamese invasion. Secondly, they accepted an American plan to assist in a transition stage during which the responsibility for rebuilding the Vietnamese military could be transferred to the MAAG in an orderly fashion. General Collins, in addition to engineering the understanding with General Ely, had advised Premier Diem to reduce his 210,000-man military and naval forces to a level of 100,000, a figure which the U.S. State Department felt the United States could realistically support and train.

The American plan to begin assisting South Vietnam encountered further delay even after the Ely-Collins understanding had been reached. Ely's government, arguing that the United States had agreed to provide only one-third of the amount France had requested to finance its Indochina forces, refused to ratify the agreement. The deadlock was finally resolved on 11 February 1955 when French

officials accepted the terms of the Ely-Collins arrangement in a revised form.

A combined Franco-American training command, designated the Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM), became operational in Saigon the day following the French ratification of the Ely-Collins understanding.* Headed by Lieutenant General O'Daniel but under the "overall authority" of General Ely, TRIM was structured to prevent domination by either French or Americans. The training mission was composed of four divisions, Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Security, each of which was headed alternately by either an American or a French officer. The chief of each division had as his deputy an officer of the opposite nationality. U.S. officers, however, headed the divisions considered by MAAG officials as the most important—Army and National Security. Operating through TRIM and assisted by the French military, the USMAAG was tasked with implementing the U.S. Military Assistance Program in a manner that would help shape the Vietnamese national forces into a cohesive defense establishment prior to the withdrawal of French forces.

Origins of U.S. Marine Assistance

Only one U.S. Marine was serving with the USMAAG in Saigon when TRIM became operational—Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Croizat.** Croizat's assignment to the U.S. advisory group had resulted when General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, nominated him to fill a newly created billet as liaison officer between the MAAG and the French High Command during the latter stages of the Indochina War. Largely because of his French language fluency and his former association with many French officers while attending their war college in 1949, Croizat was chosen for the assignment.

*The combined training mission originally was designated the Allied Training Operations Mission. This designation was changed prior to the time the mission became operational.

**Other Marines, however, were present in Saigon at the time. They were those assigned to the American Embassy. One officer was serving as Assistant Naval Attache/Assistant Naval Attache for Air, and 12 other Marines were serving as security guards.

Lieutenant Colonel Croizat, however, did not arrive in Vietnam until 2 August 1954. By then the cease-fire agreement had been signed at Geneva and the need for a liaison officer with the French High Command no longer existed. General O'Daniel, therefore, assigned the newly arrived Marine officer to serve on the General Commission for Refugees which had been created by the South Vietnamese Government immediately after the cease-fire. In this capacity Croizat became directly involved in the construction of refugee reception centers and the selection and development of resettlement areas in the South. When U.S. naval forces began assisting in the evacuation of North Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat was sent to Haiphong, the principal seaport of Tonkin. There he headed the MAAG detachment and was responsible for coordinating U.S. operations in the area with those of the French and Vietnamese. When the so-called "Passage to Freedom" concluded in May 1955, 807,000 people, 469,000 tons of equipment and supplies, and 23,000 vehicles had been evacuated from Communist North Vietnam.* It was not until February 1955 that the Marine returned to Saigon.

During Lieutenant Colonel Croizat's absence, Premier Diem had acted on a long-standing proposal to create a small Vietnamese Marine Corps. The issue of a separate Marine force composed of Vietnamese national troops had surfaced frequently since the birth of the Vietnamese Navy in the early 1950s. Although the proposal had been heartily endorsed by a number of senior French Navy officers, the downward spiral of the French war effort had intervened to prevent the subject from being advanced beyond a conceptual stage. Largely as a result of earlier discussions with Croizat, Premier Diem acted on the matter on 13 October when he signed a decree which included the following articles:

> ARTICLE 1. Effective 1 October 1954 there is created within the Naval Establishment a corps of infantry specializing in the surveillance of waterways and amphibious operations on the coast and rivers, to be designated as:

*The French moved 497,000 people, 400,000 tons of equipment and supplies, and 15,000 vehicles. The U.S. Navy moved the balance.

'THE MARINE CORPS'

• • •

ARTICLE 3. The Marine Corps shall consist of various type units suited to their functions and either already existing in the Army or Naval forces or to be created in accordance with the development plan for the armed forces. [1]

In accordance with this decree a miscellaneous collection of commando-type units was transferred from the Vietnamese National Army and Navy to the Marine Corps. Except for a naval commando unit, which had conducted amphibious raids along the coastal plains, these forces had operated in the Red River Delta with the French and Vietnamese Navy *dinassauts* (river assault divisions). First employed in 1946, the *dinassauts* had evolved into relatively effective naval commands capable of landing light infantry companies along Indochina's tangled riverbanks. Normally the *dinassaut* was composed of about a dozen armored and armed landing craft, patrol boats, and command vessels. An Army commando unit, consisting of approximately 100 men, would be attached to such naval commands for specific operations. Thus organized, the *dinassauts* could transport light infantry units into otherwise inaccessible areas and support landings with heavy caliber automatic weapons and mortar fire. Such operations had been particularly successful in the sprawling Red River Delta of Tonkin where navigable estuaries and Viet Minh abounded.* Later in the war, as the concept was refined, the French created a number of Vietnamese National Army commando units for specific service with the *dinassauts*. Still attached to the Navy commands these units were sometimes responsible for security around the *dinassaut* bases when not involved in preplanned operations. A number of these rather elite Vietnamese units, variously designated light support companies, river boat companies, and commandos, were now transferred to the newly decreed Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC).

By the time Lieutenant Colonel Croizat returned to Saigon in early 1955 these units, which totalled approximately 2,400 officers and men, had been evacuated from North Vietnam. Several of the commandos had been assembled at Nha Trang on South Vietnam's central coast where the French still maintained an extensive naval training facility. There, under the supervision of a junior French commando officer, several former commandos had been organized into the 1st Marine Landing Battalion (or 1st Landing Battalion). The balance of the newly designated Marine units, however, were scattered in small, widely separated garrisons from Hue to the Mekong Delta. These units included six river boat companies, five combat support light companies, and a small training flotilla. Diem had appointed a former Vietnamese National Army officer, Major Le Quang Trong, as Senior Marine Officer. But because no formal headquarters had been created and because no real command structure existed, Major Trong remained relatively isolated from his far-flung Marine infantry units.

Upon returning to Saigon, Croizat was assigned to the MAAG's Naval Section and subsequently to TRIM's Naval Division as the senior U.S. advisor to the newly created Vietnamese Marine Corps. In this capacity the Marine officer quickly determined that the small Vietnamese amphibious force was faced with several serious problems. First, and perhaps its most critical, was that despite Premier Diem's decree, the Marine Corps continued to exist essentially on an informal basis. "The Marine Corps itself had no real identity," its U.S. advisor later explained. "It was a scattering of dissimilar units extending from Hue to the Mekong Delta area."[2] The fact that its widespread units were still dependent on the French Expeditionary Corps for logistical support underscored the weakness inherent in the VNMC's initial status.

Other problems arose from the continuation of French officers in command billets throughout the Vietnamese naval forces. Under the Franco-American agreement which had created TRIM, a French Navy captain doubled as chief of the combined training missions' Naval Division and as commanding officer of the Vietnamese naval forces. This placed the French in a position to review any proposals advanced by the U.S. Marine advisor. Complicating the situation even further, a French Army captain, Jean Louis Delayen, actually

*Of the *dinassaut* Bernard Fall wrote: "[It] may well have been one of the few worthwhile contributions of the Indochina war to military knowledge." (Fall, *Street Without Joy*, p. 39) A more thorough analysis of *dinassaut* operations is included in Croizat, *A Translation From The French Lessons of the War*, pp. 348–351.

commanded the 1st Landing Battalion at Nha Trang.*

Demobilization presented another potential difficulty for the Vietnamese Marine Corps in early 1955. Under the U.S.-Vietnamese force level agreements, the Vietnamese naval forces were limited to 3,000 men. The Marine Corps, which alone totalled a disproportionate 2,400 men, had been instructed to reduce its strength to 1,137 men and officers. With no effective centralized command structure and so many widely separated units, even the relatively simple task of mustering out troops assumed the dimensions of a complex administrative undertaking.

In short, the very existence of the Vietnamese Marine Corps was threatened in a number of interrelated situations. The continuation of a separate and distinct Marine Corps hinged ultimately, of course, on the overall reorganization of the Vietnamese armed forces and their support structure. Essentially it would be necessary to establish a requirement for such an organization within South Vietnam's future military-naval structure. Croizat personally sensed that this would be the pivotal issue in determining the VNMC's future. "There were numerous representatives of the three military services from each of the three countries concerned with the fate of the Vietnamese Army, Navy, and Air Force," he pointed out. "But, there was no champion from within the Vietnamese Marine Corps since no Corps existed except on paper."[3] Thus, it was left initially to a French captain, a Vietnamese major, and a U.S. Marine lieutenant colonel to keep alive the idea that South Vietnam's defense establishment needed a separate Marine Corps.

Political Stabilization and Its Effects

During early 1955 the entire South Vietnamese government was engulfed by a crisis which threatened to disrupt the American plans to help build a viable anti-Communist country. The crisis occurred not in the form of an overt North Vietnamese attack but rather as a result of the South's political instability. In February the leaders of the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, and the Binh Xuyen, dissatisfied with Premier Diem's refusal to accede to their various demands, formed the United Front of National Forces.

By mid-March the disaffected leaders of these organizations felt strong enough to test the premier's strength. Trouble began late that month when the Hoa Hao began undertaking guerrilla-type activities against Diem's National Army units in the sect's stronghold southwest of Saigon. On 28 March Diem ordered a company of paratroops to seize the Saigon Central Police Headquarters which the French had allowed the Binh Xuyen to control. Fighting erupted throughout the capital the next day as Binh Xuyen units clashed with loyal government forces. A truce was arranged finally in the city on 31 March after three days of intermittent but fierce fighting. That same day the Cao Dai broke with the United Front and accepted a government offer to integrate some of its troops into the National Army.

An uneasy peace prevailed over South Vietnam until 28 April when new fighting broke out. By the middle of May, government forces had driven the Binh Xuyen forces from Saigon, fracturing their organization. Remnants of the bandit group, however, escaped into the extensive Rung Sat swamps south of the capital where they continued fighting individually and in small groups. In the countryside south of Saigon, 30 of Diem's battalions, including the 1st Landing Battalion, took the offensive against the Hoa Hao regular and guerrilla forces.

The national crisis, for all practical purposes, ended in the last week of June when a Hoa Hao leader surrendered 8,000 regulars and ordered his followers to cease all anti-government activities. Sporadic fighting continued, however, as Diem's forces sought to mop-up Hoa Hao splinter groups fighting in the western Mekong Delta and Binh Xuyen elements still resisting in the rugged mangrove swamps south of the capital. In August the Marine Landing Battalion fought a decisive action against the remaining Hoa Hao in Kien Giang Province about 120 miles southwest of Saigon, destroying the rebel headquarters. Later in the year the 1st Landing Battalion, joined by several river boat companies, reduced one of the last

*Delayen, described by Croizat as "an exceptionally qualified French Commando officer," later attended the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico. (Croizat, "Notes on The Organization," p. 3.)

pockets of Binh Xuyen resistance in the Rung Sat. As a result of these and similar actions being fought simultaneously by loyal Army units, organized resistance to Premier Diem gradually collapsed.*

The sect crisis of 1955 proved to be the turning point in Diem's political fortunes. At the height of the crisis, Emperor Bao Dai attempted to remove Diem as premier by ordering him to France for "consultations." Electing to remain in Saigon and direct his government efforts to quell the rebellion, the premier declined Bao Dai's summons. The Vietnamese military forces proved loyal to the premier, having faithfully executed Diem's commands throughout the emergency. Having successfully met the armed challenge of the sects and the Binh Xuyen and having openly repudiated Bao Dai's authority, Premier Diem had imposed at least a measure of political stability on South Vietnam.

An epilogue to the sect crisis was written on 23 October when a nationwide referendum was held in South Vietnam to settle the issue of national leadership. In the balloting, since criticized as having been rigged, Premier Diem received 98.2 percent of the total vote against Bao Dai. Three days later, on 26 October, South Vietnam's new president proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

The Vietnamese Marine Corps benefited greatly from Premier Diem's successful confrontation with his political rivals. On 1 May, in preparation for the 1st Landing Battalion's deployment to combat, Major Trong had established a small Marine Corps headquarters in Saigon. Shortly thereafter, Diem had appointed a Vietnamese officer, Captain Bui Pho Chi, to replace Captain Delayen as commander of the landing battalion. The French commando officer, who was a member of TRIM, remained at Nha Trang as an advisor to the VNMC. Then, on the last day of June, Diem removed the remaining French officers from command positions throughout South Vietnam's naval forces. The combined effect of these actions was to reduce French influence throughout the nation's naval establishment while making the Vietnamese Marine Corps more responsive to the central government.

The burdens of demobilization also were lightened somewhat as a result of the sect crisis when a new force level was approved by the United States in mid-summer of 1955. The new agreement, dictated in part by the requirement to integrate portions of the sects' armies into the national forces, raised the force level to 150,000 men and placed the personnel ceiling of the Vietnamese naval forces at 4,000 men. This revision enhanced the prospects for a corresponding increase in the authorized strength of the VNMC.

The 1st Landing Battalion's performance against the sect forces in the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat, moreover, tempered much of the previous opposition to a separate VNMC. Heretofore, U.S. and Vietnamese Army officers had opposed the existence of a Vietnamese amphibious force apart from the National Army. Until the sect uprising, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat had used the influence afforded by his position as naval advisor to the general staff to advocate the continuation of the VNMC. But during the sect battles the Vietnamese Marines had firmly established their value to the new government. By displaying loyalty, discipline, and efficiency in combat, they had spoken out in their own behalf at a critical juncture in their corp's existence.

Shortly before the 1st Landing Battalion deployed to fight the rebellious sect forces, two additional U.S. Marine advisors—an officer and a noncommissioned officer—arrived in South Vietnam for duty with the MAAG. Both Marines were assigned to TRIM. Croizat dispatched the officer, Captain James T. Breckinridge, to Nha Trang where he soon replaced Captain Delayen as advisor to the 1st Landing Battalion. As State Department policy prohibited U.S. military personnel from participating in combat activities with indigenous forces, Breckinridge was forced to await the battalion's return from the field. During its absence he divided his time between Nha Trang and Saigon where he assisted Colonel Croizat with planning and logistics matters. The noncommissioned officer, Technical Sergeant Jackson E. Tracy, initially remained in Saigon but later moved to Nha Trang. There, serving principally as a small unit tactics instructor to the Vietnamese Marines, Tracy impressed Breckinridge as a "first-

*Some sources contend that remnants of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai armies survived to operate alongside the Viet Cong guerrillas who began threatening the Diem government in the late 1950s. (Kahin and Lewis, *The U.S. in Vietnam*, p. 111.)

Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Croizat, first U.S. Marine Advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, translates during discussions between Lieutenant General John "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, USA, Chief, USMAAG, Vietnam, and Premier Ngo Dinh Diem. (Photo courtesy of Colonel Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.)).

rate Marine 'NCO'—one who could carry out the most complex assignment with little or no supervision." [4]

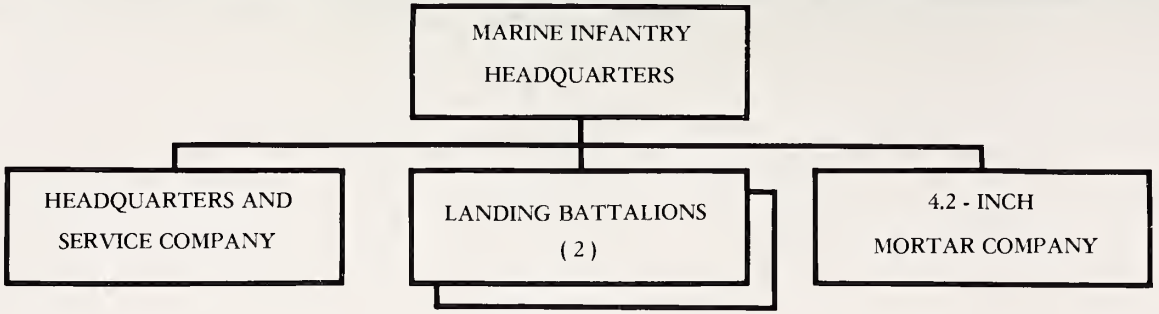
Soon after 1956 opened, President Diem appointed a new officer to head the Vietnamese Marine Corps. On 18 January Major Phan Van Lieu assumed command of the VNMC, and thereby became the second Senior Marine Officer.

Reorganization and Progress

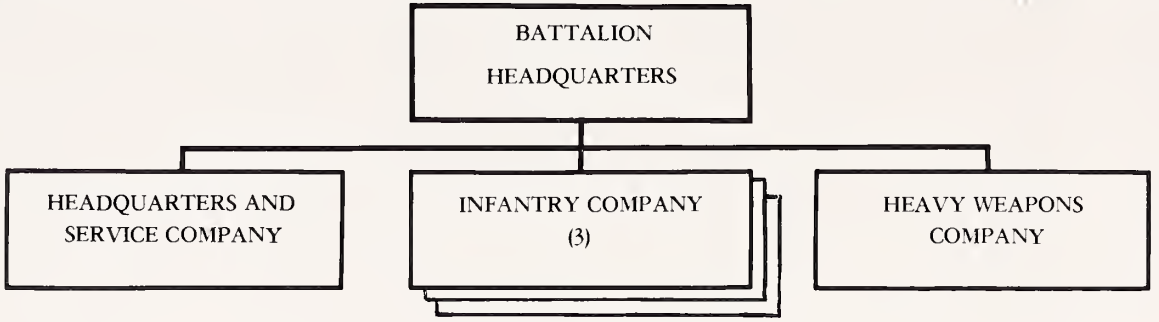
The 1st Landing Battalion remained in action against the Binh Xuyen remnants until February 1956. During this period Lieutenant Colonel Croizat reviewed the entire organizational structure of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. By now the size of the service had been reduced to roughly 1,800 officers and men although it retained its original organization of six river boat companies, five light support companies, a landing battalion, a training flotilla, and a small headquarters.

This organization, with so many dissimilar units existing on one echelon, influenced Croizat to suggest that Major Lieu restructure the service. Assisted by Croizat, Captain Breckinridge, and Technical Sergeant Tracy, Lieu and his small staff spent several months developing and refining plans for the comprehensive reorganization of the Marine Corps. Lieu submitted this package to the Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) on 21 December 1955. The salient feature of the plan was to create an additional landing battalion without increasing the 1,837-man ceiling which then governed the size of the VNMC. Significantly, the plan contained a clause proposing that the Vietnamese Marine Corps be expanded to regimental size in the future.[5]

The Vietnamese Joint General Staff approved the new structure, and reorganization of the



VNMC TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 18 FEBRUARY 1956
AUTHORIZED STRENGTH, 1,837



LANDING BATTALION TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 18 FEBRUARY 1956
AUTHORIZED STRENGTH 728

VNMC was begun when the 1st Landing Battalion finally returned to Nha Trang in February. The old river boat and light support companies were disbanded and three new units—a 4.2-inch mortar company, a headquarters and service company, and a new landing battalion—were formed. Designated the 2d Landing Battalion, this new unit formed about 25 miles south of Nha Trang at Cam Ranh Bay where the French had trained amphibious forces during the latter stages of the Indochina War.

As a result of the 1956 reorganization effort, the tables of organization and tables of equipment for the Vietnamese Marine battalions were completely revised. Three infantry companies, a heavy weapons company, and a headquarters and service company now comprised a landing battalion.* Each infantry company was organized into three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. In turn, the rifle platoons each consisted of three 10-man squads (three 3-man fire teams and a squad leader). The individual Vietnamese Marine rifleman was armed with the .30 caliber M–1 carbine, a weapon formerly carried by many French and Vietnamese commandos. It had been retained for use within the VNMC because it was substantially shorter and lighter than the standard U.S. infantry weapon, the M–1 rifle, and was therefore better suited to the small Vietnamese fighting man. The automatic rifleman in each Vietnamese Marine fire team carried the Browning automatic rifle (BAR), a heavier .30 caliber automatic weapon. The weapons platoon of the rifle company was built around six .30 caliber light machine guns. Within the heavy weapons company of the landing battalions was a mortar platoon, equipped with four 81mm mortars, and a recoilless rifle platoon.

While this reorganization was underway, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat initiated a search for acceptable means of expanding the Vietnamese Marine Corps to regimental size. A staff study produced by the Senior Marine Advisor a month before the first phase of the reorganization effort had begun included several important recommendations. Croizat proposed to General O'Daniel that authorization be granted to raise the ceiling on the VNMC from 1,837 to 2,435 officers and men. This, the Marine advisor pointed out, could be accomplished without affecting the overall ceiling on all South Vietnamese military and naval forces. By reassigning to the Vietnamese Marine Corps an amphibious battalion still organized within the National Army, the 150,000-man force level would not be altered. This would transform the Vietnamese Marine Corps into a three battalion regiment and would unify all South Vietnamese amphibious forces under a single command. Croizat's study further recommended that the Vietnamese Marine Corps be designated part of the general reserve of the nation's armed forces and that it be controlled directly by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Although no immediate action was taken on these recommendations, they were to serve as a blueprint for the future expansion of the VNMC. Equally important, they bore the seed that would eventually make the Vietnamese Marine Corps a fully integrated component of South Vietnam's defense establishment.

During the ensuing three years, several apparently unrelated occurrences impacted either directly or indirectly on the U.S. Marine advisory effort in South Vietnam. The French completed their military withdrawal from South Vietnam and dissolved their High Command in April 1956, slightly ahead of schedule.* In conjunction with this final phase of the French withdrawal, the Training Relations Instructions Mission was abolished. Thus, it was no longer necessary for the MAAG programs to be executed through the combined training mission.

Shortly after the departure of the last French troops, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat ended his assignment as Senior Marine Advisor. He was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel William N. Wilkes, Jr., in June 1956. A veteran of the Guadalcanal campaign, Wilkes came to Vietnam from Washington, D.C. where he had recently completed a French language course. Like his predecessor, the new Senior Marine Advisor was scheduled to serve in Vietnam for two years.

In August, less than two months after Lieutenant Colonel Wilkes' arrival, President Diem appointed

*Whereas U.S. Marine infantry companies were designated by letters (A, B, C, D, etc.), the Vietnamese Marine infantry companies were given number designations.

*A few French naval officers and noncommissioned officers remained at Nha Trang as instructors until late May 1957.

a new officer to head his Marine Corps. This time Bui Pho Chi, the captain who had commanded the 1st Landing Battalion during the sect uprising, was selected for the assignment. Chi's appointment was only temporary, however, for in October Diem ordered Major Le Nhu Hung to assume command of the Marine Corps. Major Hung, who became the VNMC's fourth Senior Officer, was to hold the position for four years.

An attempt to abolish the Vietnamese Marine Corps coincided with the series of changes in its leadership and the departure of Lieutenant Colonel Croizat. During the summer months, the Vietnamese Minister of Defense proposed that the VNMC be made a branch of South Vietnam's Army. Fortunately, the recent combat record of the 1st Landing Battalion outweighed the minister's influence and the effort to disestablish the Vietnamese Marine Corps was thwarted.

Another noteworthy incident in the record of the early relations between the U.S. and Vietnamese Marines occurred when the Marine noncommissioned officer billet within the MAAG was upgraded to an officer position. This adjustment, which anticipated the creation of the 2d Landing Battalion, had the effect of making a U.S. Marine officer available to advise individual VNMC battalions on a permanent basis. Thus originated a plan whereby a U.S. Marine officer would advise each Vietnamese Marine battalion—a concept abandoned only temporarily between 1959 and 1962.

The Vietnamese Marine Corps continued as a two-battalion regiment under the command of Major Le Nhu Hung from mid-1956 through 1959. During this period Lieutenant Colonel Wilkes and his successor, Lieutenant Colonel Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr., a Marine who had served as an aide to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, instituted a variety of programs intended to provide the Vietnamese Marines with a common base of experience and training.* Perhaps the most important of these was one implemented in 1958 whereby Vietnamese Marine officers began attending basic and intermediate level schools at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico. Other formal schools for noncommissioned officers were established by the Vietnamese Marine Corps in South Vietnam. In an effort to build *esprit de corps* among the lower ranking Vietnamese Marines, the U.S. advisors encouraged voluntary enlistments. They also persuaded their Vietnamsee counterparts to adopt a corps-wide marksmanship training program similar to the one then in use by the U.S. Marine Corps.

In conjunction with the reorganization of the VNMC and the stress being placed upon small unit and individual training, much of the U.S. advisory effort during this period was devoted to logistics. The Marine advisors soon discovered that the Vietnamese officers, who had not been directly concerned with supply matters under the French, tended to ignore this important area. "The real problem," explained Captain Breckinridge, "was the newness of it all. The Vietnamese officers simply possessed no base of experience or training in logistic matters."[6] This shortcoming dictated that the American advisors not only design a workable logistics system but closely supervise its operation as well. Wilkes and Wilkinson instituted intensive schooling of supply and maintenance personnel and emphasized the value of command supervision to the Vietnamese leaders. The Marine advisors, for example, taught their counterparts that equipment shortages could often be prevented if command attention were given to requisitions. Still, even with constant supervision and formal schooling, the Vietnamese Marine Corps continued to experience problems in this area throughout the 1950s and well into the next decade. Breckinridge, who returned to serve with the Vietnamese Marines again as a lieutenant colonel in the late 1960s, recalled shortages of such vital and common items as small arms ammunition even then.

The years between 1955 and 1959 also saw the Marine advisors working to overcome a potentially more serious problem, one that also dated from the French-Indochina War. From the outset of their experience with the Vietnamese Marine Corps, the Marine advisors perceived that a strong defensive orientation seemed to pervade every echelon of the small service. Most Americans, including U.S. Army advisors who were encountering similar difficulties with the Vietnamese Army, agreed that this "defensive psychology" was a by-product of the long subordination of the

*See Appendix A for complete listings of VNMC Commandants and Senior Marine Advisors to the VNMC during the 1954–1964 period.

First group of Vietnamese Marine officers to attend U.S. Marine Officers Basic School, Quantico, Virginia, pose with Lieutenant Colonel Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr. (second from right), and Captain Michael Gott (extreme right). At the extreme left is Captain Le Nguyen Khang, a future Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. To his immediate left is Major Le Nhu Hung, a senior officer of the VNMC. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Gott, USMC).

Vietnamese National forces to the French High Command. Indeed, a criticism frequently voiced by USMAAG officials during the Indochina War had been that the French tended to frustrate the development of the Vietnamese military forces by assigning them static security tasks rather than offensive missions. Even though the forerunners of the Vietnamese Marine battalions had operated as commando units, they too had seen extensive duty protecting *dinassaut* bases and other French installations. Now this defensive thinking was affecting the attitude of the Vietnamese Marine toward training. Moreover, it was threatening the American effort to transform the service into an aggressive amphibious strike force.

By nature this particular problem defied quick, simple solutions. The Marine advisors, therefore, undertook to adjust the orientation of the entire Vietnamese Marine Corps over a prolonged period through continuous emphasis on offensive training. The advisors consistently encouraged their Vietnamese counterparts to develop training schedules which stressed patrolling, ambushing, fire and maneuver, and night movement. In this same connection the Marine advisors translated U.S. Marine small unit tactics manuals into French, whereupon the same manuals were further translated by Vietnamese Marines into Vietnamese. This process assured that adequate training literature was made available to the individual Marine and his small unit leaders. The offensively oriented training programs and the translation project complemented one another, and combined with continuous supervision by the U.S. advisors and the return of young Vietnamese officers from Quantico, gradually helped impart a more ag-

gressive offensive spirit to the entire Marine Corps.

Summing Up Developments

The years between 1955 and 1959 constitute perhaps the most critical and challenging span in the chronicle of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Born out of the confusion which dominated South Vietnam in the aftermath of the Geneva Agreement, the embryonic Marine Corps had survived against heavy odds. Even before its scattered components could be drawn together under a centralized command, the Corps had been hurled into combat against the rebellious sects. Over the course of their commitment the Vietnamese Marines had strengthened their own cause through demonstrations of their fighting capability and loyalty. In terms of the VNMC's continued existence, equally critical battles were being waged in Saigon where the Senior U.S. Marine Advisor and the Vietnamese Senior Marine Officer struggled to gain support for the infant service. It was there, ironically, that the destiny of the Vietnamese Marine Corps ultimately had been decided.

On balance, the interval between 1955 and 1959 was characterized by uncertainty, transition, and problem solving. Never sure of the Marine Corps' future, the Senior Vietnamese Marine Officer and a handful of U.S. Marine advisors had carried forward their efforts to transform scattered French-inspired river commando units into a coherent and responsive American-style amphibious force. While this transformation was only partially realized, definite progress was apparent. Vietnamese officers had replaced French commanders, and with American guidance, had given their service a strong interim structure. Many of the more serious problems which had plagued the struggling organization since its inception had been identified. With American assistance, solutions to those problems were being developed and tested. So, despite a stormy beginning and a threatened early childhood, the Vietnamese Marine Corps lived.

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CHAPTER 3

Vietnamese Marines and the Communist Insurgency

Origins and Early Stages of Insurgency—Insurgency and the Vietnamese Marine Corps—Ancillary Effects on Marine Pacific Commands—American Decisions at the Close of 1961

Origins and Early Stages of Insurgency

South Vietnam gave every outward indication that it had achieved a measure of overall stability in the two-year period following President Diem's election in the fall of 1955. In early 1956 Diem felt strong enough politically to announce his government's refusal to participate in the reunification elections scheduled for midyear. He based this position upon the argument that free elections were impossible in Communist North Vietnam. The proposed July election deadline passed without a serious reaction by North Vietnam. Equally encouraging was the fact that there had been no noticeable resurgence in the armed power of either the politico-religious sects or the Binh Xuyen. At the same time the American-backed South Vietnamese economy appeared to be gaining considerable strength.

The threat of invasion from the North had also been tempered somewhat by 1958. The MAAG, now headed by Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, U.S. Army, a commander respected as a tough disciplinarian, was beginning to reshape the former Vietnamese national forces.* Renamed the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the army now consisted of four field divisions (8,500 men each), six light divisions (5,000 men each), 13 territorial regiments (whose strength varied), and a parachute regiment. Although General Williams viewed this as merely an interim

Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, USA, Commander, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam. (USA Photo SC494954).

organization, it had provided the South Vietnamese army with a unified command structure based on sound organizational principles. The arrival of a 350-man U.S. Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM) in 1956, moreover, had freed U.S. Army advisors for assignment to each ARVN regiment. American officers were likewise reorganizing and helping train the small

*General Williams would head the MAAG until his retirement in 1960.

Vietnamese Navy (2,160 officers and men) and Air Force (4,000 officers and men). The Vietnamese Marine Corps continued to exist as a two-battalion amphibious force within the nation's naval establishment. General Williams felt confident that by 1958 South Vietnam's regular military establishment had been strengthened enough to discourage North Vietnamese leaders from seriously considering an outright invasion.[1]

Backing these developing regular forces, at least on paper, were two generally feeble paramilitary organizations—the Civil Guard (CG) and the Village Self Defense Corps (SDC). The larger of these, the Civil Guard, existed within the Ministry of Interior and was funded and advised by the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM). Its 48,000 men, therefore, were not charged against the 150,000-man force level ceiling that regulated the size of Diem's regular forces. Nor were the 47,000 members of the Self Defense Corps, even though this organization received limited amounts of U.S. military assistance funds for payroll purposes. In any case, serious shortcomings were evident in both the CG and the SDC. Organized into provincial companies directly responsible to the various province chiefs, the Civil Guard was entirely separate from the ARVN chain of command. Furthermore, American civilians under government contract had armed and trained the CG for police-type as opposed to military missions. The SDC, essentially a scattering of local militia units, was even weaker, having been organized at the village level into squads and an occasional platoon. Although the SDC units were subordinate to the respective village chief, the ARVN bore the responsibility for providing them with arms and training. More often than not the Vietnamese Army units gave their obsolete weapons to the SDC and showed little genuine interest in training the small units.[2]

Although a measure of stability was obviously returning to South Vietnam by 1958, one of the country's more serious problems remained unsolved—the threat of subversion by Communist Viet Minh agents who had remained south of the 17th parallel following the Geneva cease-fire. Following the resolution of the sect crisis in 1955, Diem turned to neutralize this potential threat. Initially his army experienced some success with pacification operations conducted in former Viet Minh strongholds. While they did help extend government control into the rural areas of several provinces, such operations were discontinued in 1956.

Another policy initiated that same year seems to have nullified the moderate gains produced by the pacification campaigns. Acting both to eliminate Viet Minh sympathizers from positions of leadership at the local level and to extend his own grip downward to the rural population, Diem replaced elected village officials with appointed chiefs. The new policy, which threatened the traditional autonomy of the individual Vietnamese village, was immediately unpopular.

So was another government program which Diem implemented to undercut Communist strength throughout the country—the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign. Initiated in mid-1955 to discredit former Viet Minh, the denunciation campaign evolved into something of a witch hunt. By the late 1950s large numbers of Vietnamese with only minimal Communist connections were allegedly being confined in political re-education camps. Like the appointment of village leaders, the denunciation campaign served to alienate Vietnamese who might otherwise have supported the central government in its struggle for control of the rural regions.

Forced underground by the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign, Viet Minh agents concentrated on strengthening their political posture for the proposed general election in the period immediately following the Geneva Agreement. When the hope of reunification by plebiscite passed in mid-1956, the so-called "stay behinds" began rebuilding clandestine political cells in their former strongholds. Having retained their aptitude for the adroit manipulation of local grievances, the Communists gradually won support from rural Vietnamese who saw themselves threatened by the new government policies. In mid-1957, the Communists, who were now being labelled "Viet Cong" by the Diem government (a derogatory but accurate term which, literally translated, meant "Vietnamese Communist") began assassinating government officials in several of the country's rural provinces. Aimed at unpopular village chiefs, rural police, district officials, and school teachers, the Viet Cong's assassination campaign was undertaken to erode the government's contacts with the

local populace and thereby enhance their own organizational efforts.

Still faced with the possibility of a conventional attack across the demilitarized zone, President Diem was reluctant to commit his regular military units to a problem which seemed to demand police-type operations. Seeing no clear-cut threat, he relied on the Village Self Defense Corps and the Civil Guard to maintain order in the provinces. Poorly led and equipped, and trained primarily in urban police methods, the paramilitary forces proved unable to prevent the diffuse terrorist attacks. In the 12-month period between July 1957 and July 1958, for example, some 700 more South Vietnamese officials reportedly died at the hands of Communist terrorists.[3]

The Viet Cong terror-propaganda campaigns continued apace throughout 1958. The occurrence of the first attacks on U.S. facilities in Saigon and the initiation of an anti-American propaganda campaign near the end of that year, moreover, indicated that the Communists were broadening the scope of their activities. By this time, the internal disturbances were beginning to assume the dimensions of a concerted guerrilla movement in several of the country's more heavily populated regions, including parts of the important Mekong Delta. Near the close of 1958 President Diem finally began ordering regular military units into the provinces with instructions to eliminate the Viet Cong and restore government control.

The very nature of the enemy, however, tended to render such government operations ineffective. Essentially, the Viet Cong derived their strength from the clandestine political structure which agents had established in portions of the countryside. Interwoven into the social fabric of the hamlets and villages, this political infrastructure, as it later came to be called, served a dual purpose. It was both the machinery by which the Communists exercised control over the population and a vital base of support for the growing guerrilla forces, providing the Viet Cong with men, food, intelligence information, and refuge.

As the Viet Cong guerrillas were recruited from and lived among the local populace, outsiders found it virtually impossible to identify them. Their familiarity with the local terrain, their methods of operating in small groups, and massing for attacks mostly at night made locating them equally difficult. Even their patience seemed to enhance their ability to survive. Unwilling to engage a stronger military force and realizing that a specific government operation could not continue indefinitely, the Viet Cong normally would melt into their environment with the arrival of regular units. When the operation terminated and the regular government forces withdrew, the Communists would re-emerge, often stronger than before. In many cases the guerrillas could give real meaning to their anti-government propaganda once the local population had felt the weight of military operations in their particular community. Operating in this manner, the Viet Cong were able to husband their strength while simultaneously expanding their influence.

There was ample indication that the Communist movement was not wholly indigenous to South Vietnam. Indeed, evidence of increasing North Vietnamese support for the Viet Cong was becoming apparent near the end of the decade. In May 1959, the Central Committee of the North Vietnamese Communist Party publicly announced its intention "to smash" the government of Ngo Dinh Diem.[4] By the summer of that year the Viet Cong were being reinforced with men and limited quantities of equipment infiltrated from North Vietnam. Many of the Communist infiltrators, who at this early stage were entering Diem's country across the DMZ and by sea, were southerners who had gone North with the Viet Minh in late 1954. Trained in political and military operations, these returnees added substantially to the Viet Cong's discipline and technical capabilities.*

So strengthened, the Communist guerrillas reportedly were operating in battalion strength (300- to 400-man battalions) in some areas by mid-1959. Throughout the country they had expanded their activities to include hit-and-run attacks on paramilitary posts, district headquarters, hospitals, schools, and agricultural stations. Like the assassination campaign which was underway concurrently in areas still controlled by the GVN, these attacks

*A State Department publication released in 1965 placed the number of confirmed North Vietnamese infiltrators for the years 1959 and 1960 at 1,800. It also noted that an additional 2,700 North Vietnamese were estimated to have been infiltrated during this two-year period. The vast majority of these were thought to have been former residents of southern Vietnam. (Department of State, *Aggression from the North*, p. 33.)

were conceived with political considerations in mind. By successfully raiding remote, poorly defended facilities, the Viet Cong was able to embarrass the central government while demonstrating their own strength to the local population. The raids, furthermore, produced weapons which enabled the guerrillas to operate without total dependence on the North.

By mid-1959 the security situation in the Republic of Vietnam had deteriorated to the point that much of the optimism formerly voiced by American and South Vietnamese officials had begun to disappear. The National Intelligence Estimate released in Washington during August accurately described the conditions which were settling over South Vietnam. This paper disclosed that the nation's economy was beginning to falter noticeably and that President Diem's government was growing increasingly unpopular. Furthermore, the estimate warned that harassment by the Viet Cong could be expected to intensify.[5]

As predicted, security conditions in South Vietnam did grow worse in the period following the August intelligence estimate. In the last four months of 1959 almost 200 assassinations were reported. In January 1960 another 96 civilians were killed by the Communists and in the following month the total reached 122. By the fall of 1960 the Viet Cong were strong enough to begin ambushing regular ARVN units in several provinces. Like their raids on fixed installations, their ambush tactics were resulting in frequent and demoralizing defeats for the government. Like the raids, they were also providing weapons and ammunition for the growing guerrilla forces.

By 1960 the government's inability to contain the disturbing malaise was beginning to produce political tensions in Saigon. On 26 April a group of 18 distinguished Vietnamese political figures, including a number of former cabinet members, issued a public demand for President Diem's resignation. Diem refused, eventually ordering the arrest of all who signed the manifesto.

A more serious effort to bring down the central government occurred in November when a group of military officers led by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi, the commander of a newly formed (1959) ARVN airborne brigade, staged an abortive coup d'etat in Saigon. Two companies of Vietnamese Marines joined Thi's rebellious paratroops.* But the power struggle, which began in the early morning hours of 11 November, ended when units loyal to President Diem converged on the capital. Realizing that the balance had been tipped against them, the coup leaders fled the country and the incident was closed. While it had failed to bring down the Diem government, Thi's attempted coup had revived the possibility of efforts by military leaders to seize control of the government and had injected a new element of uncertainty into South Vietnam's already unstable internal situation.

Two other danger signals flashed across Southeast Asia shortly after the abortive coup. In January 1961, Communist leaders in Hanoi announced that the National Liberation Front (NLF) had been founded in the South on 20 December 1960 with the stated purpose of closely uniting the "various classes of the South Vietnamese patriotic population in the struggle against the Americans and Diem. . . ."[6] In truth, the NLF emerged as a fully developed Communist political organization imported from North Vietnam for the purpose of controlling, directing, and coordinating the insurgency south of the 17th parallel. For American officials, the announced establishment of the NLF signified that Ho Chi Minh's government had opted for the forceful reunification of North and South.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, another event led to further speculation that the war in Vietnam was about to enter a new phase. Backed by the North Vietnamese Army, Communist Pathet Lao forces seized control of the southeastern portion of the Laotian panhandle. Thus, the North Vietnamese obtained a protected corridor along South Vietnam's northwestern border through which men and materiel could be infiltrated to the South.

The establishment of the NLF and the Communist takeover in southern Laos coincided roughly with approval in Washington of a comprehensive plan designed to help President Diem restore internal order. Designated the Counter-Insurgency Plan (CIP), this study had been ordered by President Eisenhower in early 1960. Developed by Lieutenant General Lionel C. McGarr, U.S. Army, the officer who had relieved General Williams as MAAG Chief, the completed CIP reached the

*Vietnamese Marine participation in the abortive coup of 10 November 1960 is covered in greater detail elsewhere in this chapter.

White House shortly after President John F. Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961. Significantly, its arrival came at a time when the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, was publicly pledging his country's support for "wars of national liberation."

The plan presented for the new president's consideration drew clear connections between the military and political aspects of the war in Vietnam. It included a conditional offer of U.S. support for a 20,000-man increase in the regular South Vietnamese military forces and a 32,000-man increase in the size of the Civil Guard. These military and paramilitary increases were to be dependent upon President Diem's agreement to effect major reforms in his military and political apparatus—measures which American officials in Saigon considered necessary for the success of any counter-insurgency effort.

President Kennedy approved the main provisions of the Counter-Insurgency Plan on 28 January 1961 and negotiations on the package opened with Diem two weeks later. But the talks soon deadlocked on the issue of political and military reforms. Meanwhile, with the discussions in Saigon dragging on inconclusively, the situation in the provinces continued to worsen. A National Intelligence Estimate released in March estimated that Viet Cong military strength had reached 10,000 men. Furthermore, the number of violent incidents reported in the country had risen to 650 per month. Even worse, it was estimated that 58 percent of South Vietnam was under some degree of Communist control.[7]

Convinced that the situation was becoming critical and fearing that it might soon become hopeless, President Kennedy approved a new program of military assistance to the Diem government on 29 April. Inspired in part by Kennedy's desire to increase Diem's confidence in the new U.S. administration, the 29 April program did not require concrete pledges of reform from the South Vietnamese. In its specifics, however, the new package was similar to the CIP. It contained provisions for supporting a 20,000 man increase in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF)—a move which would raise the ceiling on the South Vietnamese regular forces from 150,000 to 170,000. Another provision approved the use of Military Assistance Program appropriations for the Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps and expanded the MAAG's responsibility to include training and equipping these forces. Under the 29 April plan, the paramilitary forces were to be transferred from Diem's Ministry of the Interior to his Ministry of Defense. In order to meet its increased advisory responsibilities, authorization was given to increase the size of the MAAG by 100 men to a strength of 785. This provision allowed the first enlargement of the group since the introduction of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission in 1956.*

General McGarr's advisory group began implementing President Kennedy's 29 April program during the summer of 1961. But the increases in the government's regular and paramilitary establishments and in the size of the MAAG failed to arrest the trend of warfare on South Vietnam's battlefields. The remainder of 1961 was characterized by increasingly aggressive guerrilla operations and the steady growth of Viet Cong military forces. In August, for example, the ARVN reported 41 major armed attacks on its units. The following month brought 450 Viet Cong-initiated incidents, including several involving multi-battalion forces of over 1,000 guerrillas. In mid-September, for example, an estimated 1,500 Viet Cong overran Phuoc Vin, the capital of Phuoc Thuan Province, and held the town for an entire day before escaping unmolested into the countryside.[8]

Equally alarming was the rapid rise in the Viet Cong's overall strength. Increasing numbers of Communist troops were now being infiltrated over recently opened trails through Laos. Curving southwestward out of the North Vietnamese panhandle, these infiltration routes enabled the Communists to bypass the demilitarized zone which separated the two Vietnamese states and continue their southward movement down the length of Laos and into Cambodia. From sanctuaries within these countries the North Vietnamese could easily infiltrate into South Vietnam by using trails through the rugged mountains. Relying primarily on these routes, over 3,750 North Vietnamese infiltrators reportedly entered South Vietnam during 1961. Successful recruiting in the South served as another source of manpower for

*With the dissolution of TERM in the late 1950s, the International Control Commission had granted permission for the MAAG to maintain a strength of 685 men. When the logistics personnel departed Vietnam, new advisor billets were created within the MAAG's table of organization.

the Viet Cong. Well propagandized, the steady cadence of victories greatly enhanced the Viet Cong's prestige and thereby made recruitment less difficult. By the end of 1961 infiltration from the North and recruitment in the South had swollen the Viet Cong regular military forces to an estimated 25,000 men.

Insurgency and the Vietnamese Marine Corps

At the end of 1958, when President Diem began ordering his regular military forces into action against the Viet Cong, the Vietnamese Marine Corps was a two-battalion infantry force organized within South Vietnam's naval establishment. The 1,837-man corps was still commanded by Major Le Nhu Hung. Hung maintained his headquarters at the Cuu Long Navy Yard, an installation situated on an estuary near the Saigon-Gia Dinh boundary. Although they continued to maintain barracks at Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay respectively, the 1st and 2d Landing Battalions were now being rotated to crude little camps near Bien Hoa, a town located about 20 miles northeast of the capital. Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Wilkes as Senior Marine Advisor in mid-1958, operated out of the MAAG headquarters in Saigon but maintained an office in the VNMC headquarters at Cuu Long. Wilkinson's two assistants, Captains Gary Wilder and Dale N. Davis, lived with their battalions.

Elements of Hung's Marine Corps were among the first regular government units committed to the counterguerrilla effort. The 1st Landing Battalion was ordered into action by the Joint General Staff in the closing weeks of 1958. After deploying from Bien Hoa, the battalion spent nearly two months searching for Viet Cong is a mosquito-infested region of An Xuyen, South Vietnam's southernmost province. Primarily, the Vietnamese Marines conducted company and platoon-sized patrols through rugged mangrove swamps in search of guerrillas. When the operation ended in late January 1959, the Vietnamese commanders reported that their units had killed and captured several Communist guerrillas and political leaders. Their troops had also reported finding a suspected guerrilla training camp which contained small quantities of food and some weapons. The Vietnamese Marines suffered no casualties during their deployment. Adhering to prevailing USMAAG policy, the U.S. Marine advisors did not accompany the unit into combat. Unable to observe the operation, the American advisors could not accurately assess the battalion's tactical proficiency.

Lieutenant Colonel Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr., USMC, Senior Marine Advisor. (USMC Photo A229373).

A few months after this initial operation, both VNMC battalions were deployed against the Viet Cong—the 1st again to An Xuyen Province and the 2d to Vinh Binh Province south of Saigon on the seacoast. So deployed, both units came under the operational control of the respective province chiefs. In widely-scattered actions fought during May, the 1st Battalion and a Civil Guard unit claimed to have inflicted over 200 casualties on the Viet Cong. In Vinh Binh Province, one company of the 2d Landing Battalion reported killing 18 guerrillas and capturing over 100 more. Again, U.S. Marine advisors were not present and therefore could not assess the accuracy of these reports. In any case, these were the final combat operations for the Vietnamese Marine Corps as a two-battalion force.

Obviously, U.S. and Vietnamese authorities in Saigon were giving increased attention to the growing internal threat. Still, they had yet to initiate any sweeping changes in the orientation of the RVNAF. Indeed, in early 1959, the entire ARVN was in the final phase of a reorganization program which would culminate by mid-year in the formation of seven divisions of uniform size (10,500 men each), five territorial regiments, and an airborne brigade (formed from the old Army parachute regiment). Under the new organization the seven standard divisions were to be deployed in or near population centers throughout the country and were to be organized under two corps headquarters, one (I Corps) located at Da Nang, and the other (II Corps) located at Pleiku in the Central Highlands. A third provisional corps headquarters had also been formed in Saigon for activation in the event of a national emergency.*

One of the MAAG's reactions to the emerging guerrilla threat was to urge that President Diem transfer the Civil Guard to his Ministry of Defense. This adjustment, General Williams pointed out, would permit the MAAG to train and equip the CG for a mobile counterguerrilla mission. But it also entailed raising the 150,000-man force level ceiling. When both the Diem government and the U.S. Embassy objected to the proposed transfer, the MAAG turned to another alternative: the strengthening and use of the regular units whose assignment to counterguerrilla operations would not seriously disturb the country's counterinvasion potential. The Vietnamese Marine Corps, whose infantry battalions had already participated in several operations against the Viet Cong, fell into this category of units to be bolstered for the counterguerrilla role.

It was against this background that the VNMC was enlarged again in mid-1959. This latest expansion was generally accomplished in accordance with the staff study prepared by Lieutenant Colonel Croizat some three years earlier. On 1 June, after both Marine battalions had returned from their combat assignments in the Mekong Delta, a 3d Landing Battalion was formed at a camp just outside the Cuu Long Navy Yard. This new unit, manned primarily by troops transferred from amphibious elements then being phased out of the reorganized ARVN, was built around a small nucleus of seasoned Marine officers and noncommissioned officers. Transferred from the 1st and 2d Battalions, most of these Marines had seen combat against the Viet Minh, the sects, and the Viet Cong.

Another development saw a fourth rifle company added to each Marine infantry battalion. In turn, the old heavy weapons companies were abolished. The 81mm mortars and 57mm recoilless rifles were reorganized into platoons within the battalions' headquarters and service companies. New weapons, two 60mm mortars, and personnel to man them were added to each Marine rifle company. These adjustments raised the strength of the infantry battalions to around 900 officers and men and provided the Vietnamese Marine Corps with a basic organizational structure which its infantry battalions would retain throughout the coming decade.*

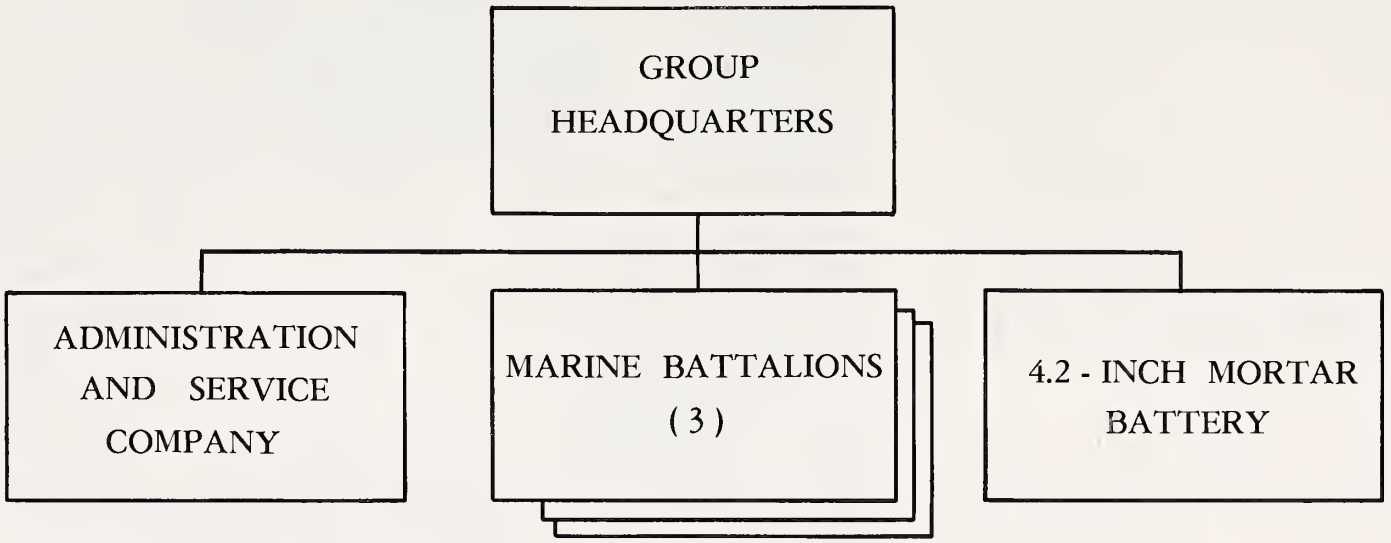
Concurrent with the formation of the 3d Battalion and the modification of the organizational tables, the VNMC was formally designated the "Marine Corps Group." Now numbering 2,276 officers and men, the Vietnamese Marines were formed into a group headquarters, a group headquarters and service company, a 4.2-inch mortar battery, and the three infantry battalions.**

As important as the VNMC's expansion, reorganization, and redesignation was the dramatic change in its role within the Vietnamese armed forces. On 1 June the Joint General Staff directed the Vietnamese Marine Corps and the newly formed ARVN airborne brigade to assume the mission of the general reserve force for the entire RVNAF. So assigned, the Vietnamese Marine Corps became a "force in readiness"—a service directly responsible to the Joint General Staff for any assigned ground warfare mission.[9]

*By 1961 the third corps headquarters would be activated and geographic boundaries of all three corps would be delineated to facilitate the coordination of the government's military efforts against the Viet Cong. These military-geographic subdivisions were termed corps tactical zones (CTZ).

*A side-effect of this reorganization was the modification of the VNMC's table of equipment. The most important change saw the Vietnamese Marine riflemen exchange their M–1 carbines for the heavier M–1 rifle, the weapon with which the ARVN infantry forces were equipped.

**The Vietnamese Marine Group continued to be known as the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) in spite of its formal redesignation.



VNMC (MARINE GROUP) TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 1 JUNE 1959
AUTHORIZED STRENGTH 2,276

The Vietnamese Marine battalions and elements of the ARVN airborne brigade (also garrisoned near Saigon) were ordered into action against the Viet Cong with increasing frequency after being designated the RVNAF general reserve. Usually, the Marine battalions, like their airborne counterparts, were assigned to operate in a particular province for a specified time period. In such assignments the battalion commander was directly responsible to the province chief who, in most cases, was a military officer. The province chiefs sometimes utilized the Marines in conjunction with their Civil Guard units. It was not uncommon for the Vietnamese Marines to find themselves conducting operations in the most rugged and inaccessible regions of the province to which they were assigned. In such deployments the Marine battalions often bore the brunt of hostile action or suffered the physical hardships associated with living and fighting in the most adverse swamps and jungles.

In connection with their continuing campaign to transform the Vietnamese Marine Corps into a truly elite fighting organization, the U.S. Marine Advisors encouraged the Vietnamese Leathernecks to take pride in the difficult and dangerous missions now being assigned. In a related effort intended to generate *esprit de corps* throughout the service, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson proposed that the Marine Corps adopt an official emblem and a distinctive uniform. These suggestions produced results when a board of Vietnamese officers selected an emblem design similar to that of the U.S. Marines. Shortly thereafter the VNMC adopted a light weight, black and green "tiger stripe" camouflaged utility uniform similar to that for-

Vietnamese Marine riflemen traverse mosquito-infested swamps of the Ca Mau Peninsula on August 1961 operation. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Gott, USMC).

merly worn in Indochina by French commando units. Although designed and procured primarily for use in steamy tropical jungles, the colorful uniform came to be worn in garrison with a dark green beret. Along with the newly adopted emblem, which was worn as a patch over the left breast pocket, this uniform became the distinguishing mark of the Vietnamese Marine and his U.S. Marine advisor. Together, the uniform and emblem did much to set the VNMC apart from the other South Vietnamese armed services.[10]

Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson instigated another change during this same period which did much to improve the effectiveness of the Marine advisory program. Since the sect rebellion of 1955 American policy had prohibited all U.S. military personnel from participating in combat with South Vietnamese forces. Because the prevailing restrictions prevented his assistants from accurately assessing the combat capabilities of the Vietnamese Marine battalions, Wilkinson requested that they be allowed to accompany their units into action. After some study, General Williams, still the MAAG Chief, approved this request with the stipulation that the U.S. Marines were to act strictly as nonparticipating observers.[11] This privilege was not extended to other MAAG personnel. Wilkinson and his assistants, therefore, became the first American servicemen to witness actual combat operations against the Viet Cong. So through an informal and relatively unknown arrangement, a handful of Marine advisors were able to insure that principles being stressed in training were being applied in combat. Now operating alongside the Vietnamese Marines in action, the advisors were also able to obtain a better appreciation of the terrain and enemy and a more thorough understanding of the frustrating problems being encountered by the VNMC units.

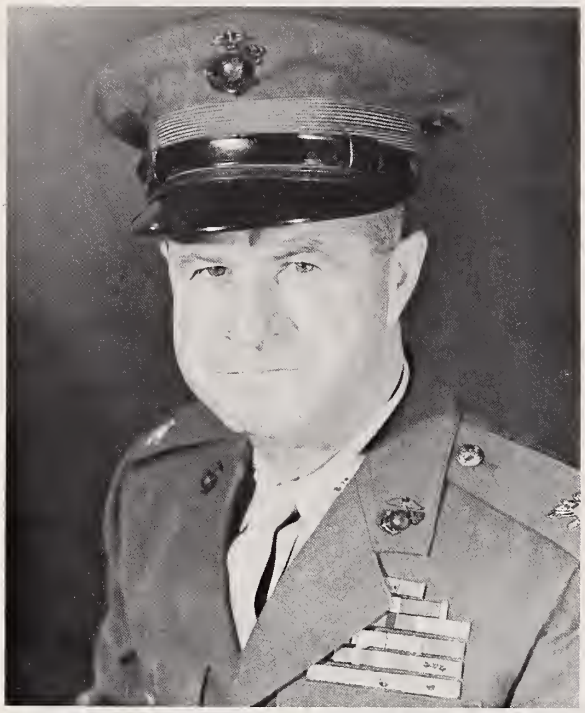
The first half of 1960 brought changes in both the leadership of the Vietnamese Marine Corps and the U.S. Marine advisory program. In May President Diem relieved Major Hung as Senior Marine Officer. His replacement was Major Le Nguyen Khang, an officer who spoke fluent English and who had been the first Vietnamese Marine graduated from the U.S. Marine Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico. A capable and inspiring officer who had formerly commanded a landing battalion in combat against the Viet Cong, Khang was to

Vietnamese Marine Corps Emblem.

head the VNMC for over three years. The following month Lieutenant Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud relieved Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson as Senior Marine Advisor. Like Khang, Robichaud had seen combat previously. A former master sergeant, he had been commissioned during World War II and had fought as an infantry unit leader on Guadalcanal and later in Korea. Like all U.S. Marines assigned as advisors to the VNMC after 1960, Robichaud was scheduled to serve only a one year tour in South Vietnam.

Combat assignments against the Viet Cong continued to dominate the VNMC's activities during the remainder of 1960. With Communist forces now capable of battalion-sized operations in some areas, the Joint General Staff began deploying government forces to the provinces in multibattalion strength. By late 1960 the Vietnamese Marines were conducting two-battalion operations controlled by a task force headquarters. Khang, now a lieutenant colonel, normally commanded these Marine task forces.

It was during one such operation, in which the 1st and 2d VNMC Battalions were operating together in the provinces south of Saigon, that



Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, USMC, Senior Marine Advisor. (USMC Photo A25342).

elements of the 3d Battalion became involved in the abortive coup of November 1960. The power struggle began in the early morning hours of the 11th while the U.S. Marine advisors were attending an informal celebration of the Marine Corps birthday at Lieutenant Colonel Robichaud's quarters in Saigon. At the appointed hour Colonel Thi's rebellious paratroops, accompanied by the 3d VNMC battalion commander and two Marine companies from Cuu Long, moved into the capital on trucks and seized the Joint General Staff Headquarters. The remainder of the 3d battalion, led by the battalion executive officer, who was unaware of his superior's intentions, moved to the presidential palace and established protection for Diem. Word of the coup, meanwhile, had reached Khang at his field headquarters in the Mekong Delta. Led by the Senior Marine Officer, the 1st and 2d Battalions returned to Saigon by truck convoy and immediately joined the two Marine companies already around the palace. For several hours the possibility existed that Khang's Marines might clash with Thi's paratroops or even with the two rebellious Marine companies of the 3d Battalion. But pro-Diem units soon began converging on Saigon in such numbers that the coup collapsed. Thi and his associates fled the country, whereupon Diem appointed new officers to command the insubordinate units. With loyalists in charge throughout South Vietnam's military and naval services, the incident was closed. Both the airborne brigade and the VNMC resumed their functions as the RVNAF general reserve.[12]

By the summer of 1961 the USMAAG, now headed by General McGarr, was ready to implement the 20,000-man expansion of the RVNAF as authorized in the package approved by President Kennedy the previous spring. Included in this U.S. program were plans to increase the size of the Vietnamese Marine Corps by over 1,000 men. This expansion got underway in July when the initial steps were taken to form a fourth infantry battalion and a 75mm pack-howitzer battery—additions which were to raise the authorized strength of the VNMC to 3,321 officers and men. The transfer of ARVN artillerymen provided the personnel necessary to man the pack-howitzer unit, which formed near Thu Duc, a small town about 13 miles north of the capital. Officers and noncommissioned officers were drawn from the three existing VNMC battalions to form a nucleus for the new infantry battalion while its ranks were filled gradually by recruitment. This 4th Battalion was organized at Vung Tau, a coastal resort town situated on Cape St. Jacques about 40 miles southeast of Saigon. Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Brown, a World War II veteran who replaced Robichaud as Senior Marine Advisor in August, was on hand to assist with this latest reorganization of the VNMC.

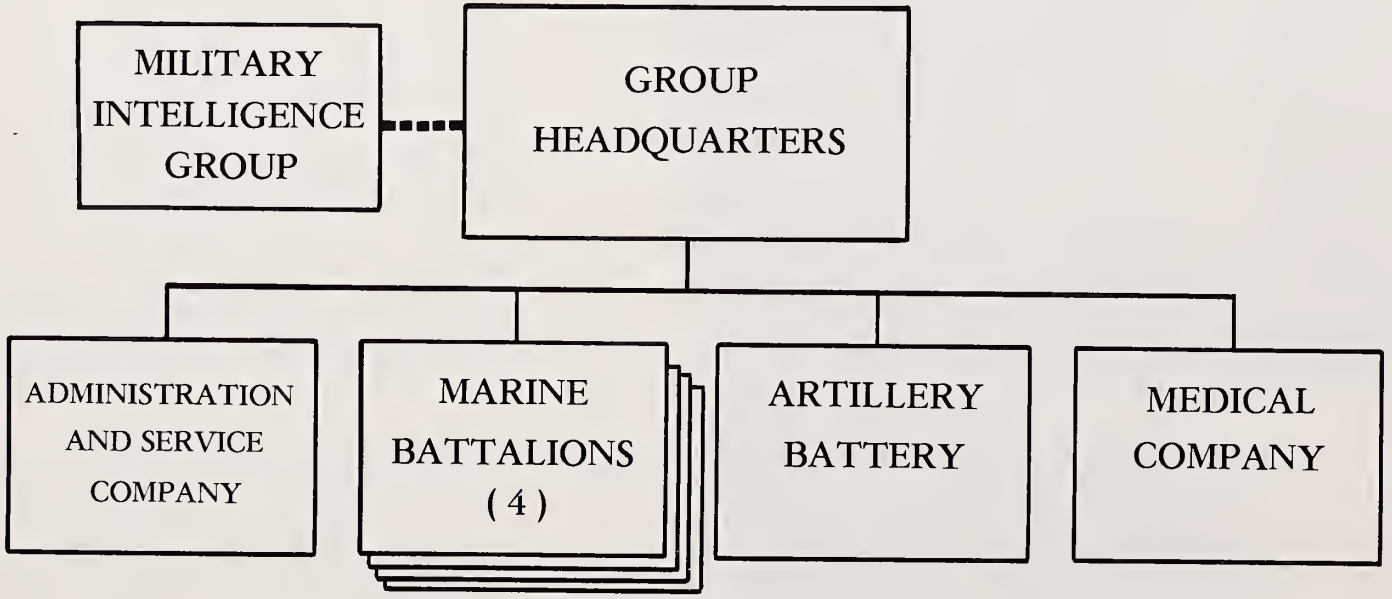
While the new Marine units were forming the JGS ordered the Vietnamese Navy and Marine Corps to conduct an amphibious assault against a suspected Communist stronghold near South Vietnam's southern tip. The objective area was a portion of the U Minh Forest, an extensive inundated region located along the western coast of the Ca Mau Peninsula. Because it was inaccessible by land, the forest had served as Communist base area since the French Indochina War. The concept of operation called for the Marines to land at daybreak, move inland through the mangrove swamps, and hopefully push Viet Cong elements into ARVN units which would have established a blocking force inland from the beach. Captains

Captain Michael J. Gott, infantry advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, discusses tactical plans with Vietnamese officers. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Gott, USMC).

Michael J. Gott and James S. G. Turner, two U.S. Marine advisors, embarked on board two World War II vintage Vietnamese Navy LCIs (landing craft, infantry) at Saigon with the 1st and 3d Battalions respectively.

A series of problems arose on the morning of the operation to delay the landing for several hours. When the Marines finally came ashore late in the morning they failed to locate any enemy forces. Captain Gott, who accompanied the 1st Battalion for the duration of the operations ashore, later recounted the difficulties. He noted, for instance, that no U.S. Navy advisors were embarked on board the Vietnamese ships. As a result, the relatively inexperienced Vietnamese sailors encountered technical difficulties with their navigational aids, and the ships arrived at the objective area late. Inexperience on the part of the Vietnamese Marines and sailors in debarkation techniques compounded the delay. Once ashore, outdated French maps and dense mangrove jungle combined to retard the Marines' progress inland, thus allowing the Viet Cong ample time to melt away. Gott concluded that some of the difficulties encountered after the landing phase of the operation might have been offset by the presence of observation aircraft. As it was, the Marines' visibility was restricted throughout the operation by thick mangrove vegetation. Thus a combination of unforeseen factors had rendered this particular operation ineffective.[13]

A similar landing was repeated in the same area the following month. Again the participating Marine units failed to engage Viet Cong forces. Vietnamese Navy and Marine officers complained that there were no enemy troops in the area and that the government's intelligence was inaccurate. Whatever the reason, the results of these two unsuccessful offensives typified the problems which plagued most South Vietnamese ground forces throughout the country during the 1960–1961 period. The Communist guerrillas, aided by



VNMC (MARINE GROUP) TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 1 AUGUST 1961

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difficult terrain, a well-developed intelligence network, and sometimes by the local population, could usually evade government units whenever escape was desirable. Because the Marines normally operated in unfamiliar areas where the Viet Cong political apparatus was strong, their units were particularly frustrated. In regions such as the U Minh Forest intelligence information simply did not flow upward from the people. Instead, in such Communist-controlled environments, the local Vietnamese served the Viet Cong, warning them of strengths, locations, and movements of Marine units.

While combat deployments such as the Ca Mau landings highlighted the remainder of 1961, the Marine battalions nevertheless spent the majority of their time in non-combat assignments. During such periods the battalions occupied their respective base camps around Saigon and Vung Tau, awaiting orders from the Joint General Staff. Even though held in reserve, they frequently were called upon to provide security detachments for vital points such as bridges, naval facilities, and communications installations. Most U.S. Marine advisors tended to oppose such assignments, contending that they detracted from the overall readiness of the battalions and disrupted much needed training. The utilization of the VNMC units in static security roles also conflicted with the advisor's continuing efforts to convince the Vietnamese Marine that he belonged to an elite, offensively oriented strike force. Still, despite the protestations of the American advisors, the JGS persisted in dispersing VNMC detachments in and around the capital.

Although its battalions were sometimes being frustrated, both in their attempts to accomplish unit training and in their attempts to fix Communist troop formations, the VNMC's involvement in the war effort was forcing improvement of the service in other areas. Frequent inspections by U.S. advisors revealed that the Vietnamese were placing more emphasis on the care of individual equipment and weapons. Replacement items were being requisitioned with more promptness and unit commanders were beginning to show increasing concern about the slow receipt of requested supply items. The replacement of worn-out World War II trucks with new vehicles removed a long-standing source of trouble in that it greatly reduced the time consumed in performing major mechanical repairs on the older vehicles. Even the frequent deployments of the VNMC battalions were helping to improve the overall combat readiness of the service by preparing a solid core of small unit leaders and troops for operations against the Viet Cong.

Ancillary Effects of Marine Pacific Commands

At the same time the intensified conflict in South Vietnam was forcing improvement on the VNMC, it was having a similar but less direct effect on U.S. Marine commands in the Pacific. In early 1961 Lieutenant General Alan Shapley, the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), approved a plan to assign individual Marines from his scattered commands to temporary duty in Vietnam. The purpose of this program, which became known as On-The-Job Training (OJT), was to allow Marine officers and noncommissioned officers to obtain firsthand knowledge of the complex nature of the conflict being waged in South Vietnam. Beginning in May 1961 small groups of officers and noncommissioned officers from various FMFPac commands were sent each month to observe the counterguerrilla techniques being developed and employed in Vietnam. Although the OJTs were normally "in country" for only a two-week period, the program was gradually producing a pool of small unit leaders somewhat acquainted with the situation in the Republic of Vietnam by the end of 1961.*

The major Marine command to feel the impact of the war in Southeast Asia during the early 1960s was the 3d Marine Division, a 20,000-man combat-ready force headquartered on Okinawa. In addition to its participation in the OJT program, the 3d Marine Division began altering its conventional amphibious orientation. Major General Donald M. Weller, the division commander, provided the initial impetus for this shift away from a purely conventional posture. Weller, who in early 1961 had commanded a task force headquarters formed in response to the deteriorating military situation in Laos, anticipated that his command

*The OJT program would be suspended briefly near the end of 1962 but would be reinstituted in the first months of 1963.

Vietnamese Marines wade ashore from a Vietnamese Navy Landing Ship, initiating a search for Viet Cong on the Ca Mau Peninsula. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Gott, USMC).

Vietnamese Marines advance from concealment during search operations on the Ca Mau Peninsula. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Gott, USMC).

might be committed to combat somewhere on the Southeast Asian mainland. He therefore instructed his staff to begin studying possible counterinsurgency training programs which would help "turn the entire orientation of the division toward the type of intervention [which] we would be faced with in Southeast Asia." [14]

Major General Robert E. Cushman, holder of a Navy Cross and a future Commandant of the Marine Corps, assumed command of the 3d Marine Division in September 1961 before General Weller's objectives could be fully realized. The new commanding general immediately convened a Counterguerrilla Warfare Study Group to consider the problem. This study group framed a set of recommendations for Cushman in late 1961. His approval of their proposals led to the creation of an Infantry Unit Training Course and a Command and Staff Training Course early the next year.

Conducted in Okinawa's rugged Northern Training Area, the infantry course prepared rifle companies from the various infantry battalions for participation in counterguerrilla warfare. The instructors, graduates of either the Jungle Warfare School in Johore, Malaya, or the new Army Special Warfare School at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, placed much emphasis on the origins and nature of guerrilla movements, small units tactics, and night operations. The training syllabus for this course included several live firing exercises designed for individual Marines and fire teams. Some of these exercises required the Marines to negotiate "jungle lanes" equipped with pop-up targets. The week-long infantry course culminated

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with a two and one-half day field operation for the individual infantry platoons.

The Command and Staff Training course was somewhat less rigorous, being designed primarily to prepare battalion staffs to support their companies in a counterinsurgency environment. Less than 10 hours in length, this course was based primarily on lectures and map exercises.

At General Cushman's direction, the division G–3 (Operations Section) began stressing the significance of counter-insurgency training at all echelons of the division. Unconventional warfare training soon became an integral part of the training schedules at every echelon. Under this program the various infantry battalions were required to conduct an extended battalion-sized counterguerrilla operation, and to report to the G–3 on the progress of their efforts.[15]

The FMFPac On-The-Job Training program and the 3d Marine Division's new approach to training complemented each other in several ways. Whereas the OJT program helped create an awareness of counterguerrilla operations among individual Marine officers and noncommissioned officers, the division's training programs achieved the same results at the staff and battalion level. At points the two programs overlapped to the further benefit of the 3d Marine Division. Attuned to the nature of guerrilla warfare and the problems involved in countering the guerrilla, the officers and noncommissioned officers who returned from OJT assignments in Vietnam provided assistance in planning and supervising the division's counterinsurgency training programs. Short of actual commitment to combat in a guerrilla-type environment, it is doubtful that any other combination of training could have better prepared the 3d Marine Division for a future assignment in Vietnam.

American Decisions at the Close of 1961

The progressive erosion of the government's strength and the steady growth of the Viet Cong during 1961 prompted President Kennedy to dispatch his special military advisor, General Maxwell D. Taylor, to Vietnam in mid-October. Taylor, who had retired in the late 1950s after having served as Chief of Staff of the Army, carried the following instructions from the president:

> I should like you to proceed to Saigon for the purpose of appraising the situation in South Vietnam, particularly as it concerns the threat to the internal security and defense of that country and adjacent areas. After you have conferred with the appropriate United States and South Vietnamese authorities, including the Commander in Chief, Pacific, I would like your views on the courses of action which our Government might take at this juncture to avoid a further deterioration in the situation in South Vietnam; and eventually to contain and eliminate the threat to its independence.[16]

Like other American officials who had visited Diem's republic during the course of the year, General Taylor returned to Washington convinced that South Vietnam was in grave danger. In a report delivered to President Kennedy in November, the general outlined his formula for salvaging the situation. This included the broad recommendation that the United States abandon its existing policy of strict military advice and begin cooperating with the Vietnamese in a form of "limited partnership." The American role in such a partnership, Taylor explained, would be to provide "working" advisors and "working" military units to aid South Vietnam's military forces.

General Taylor's report offered several specific proposals for implementing such a program. Among these were recommendations that three U.S. Army helicopter companies and approximately 6,000-8,000 American ground troops be deployed quickly to the Republic of Vietnam. The helicopter units would support the government's ground operations but the American ground forces were to be used only in a defensive posture. Taylor believed that their presence would underscore the United States' determination to stand by South Vietnam. A side-effect of this display of determination would be to stimulate the morale of the republic's armed forces. He added that in order to support such a build-up, it would be necessary to restructure and increase the size of the USMAAG.

President Kennedy's consideration of Taylor's proposals resulted in a compromise decision which cleared the way for more intense American involvement in the Vietnam conflict. After securing Diem's approval in early December, Kennedy authorized the Department of Defense to expand its advisory and assistance programs. To enhance the effectiveness of the advisory program, he removed some of

the official restrictions under which most U.S. military advisors had operated since 1955. One important change would allow all advisors to accompany their Vietnamese units into combat. At the same time President Kennedy decided against ordering U.S. ground forces into the war zone; however, he instructed the Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, to prepare plans for such a contingency. He also approved General Taylor's recommendation that American helicopter units be sent to support the RVNAF. The arrival of the first of these reinforcements just before 1961 ended, signalled the beginning of a new and more dynamic phase of American military participation in the struggle to preserve the independence of South Vietnam.

CHAPTER 4

An Expanding War, 1962

The War's New Context—Creation of MACV and Marine Advisory Division—The Vietnamese Marine Corps, 1962—Some Conclusions

The War's New Context

More than any previous year, 1962 was to be a period of deepened commitment for all participants in the continuing struggle for control of South Vietnam. On the American side plans already set in motion by President Kennedy's recent decisions promised to loosen the flow of dollars, equipment, advisors, and combat support personnel to South Vietnam. Administration officials envisioned that this sharp influx of assistance would stimulate a redoubled war effort on the part of the Diem government.

Viet Cong strength and operational capabilities likewise were on the upswing as 1962 opened. U.S. and South Vietnamese sources were placing total Viet Cong military strength at roughly 25,000 men. Backing these military forces was a far greater number of sympathizers. American agencies tended to divide the Communist military forces into three rough categories according to function and composition—main forces, local forces, and village activists. Thought to total around 9,000 men at the beginning of the year, the main forces constituted the pillar of Communist military strength in the South. They were organized into approximately 20 small (200- to 400-man) and highly mobile battalions and a number of independent companies. Main force units as a rule were cadred by North Vietnamese (or returnees trained in the North) and were capable of conducting operations on an interprovincial scale. (They often were referred to as interprovincial battalions and companies. Later in the war Americans came to call the main forces "hard core" units.) Next in terms of operational capabilities were the Viet Cong local forces whose aggregate strength stood at around 8,000 part-time but well-trained soldiers. The local forces were organized into platoons and companies which operated independently within their respective districts. Finally, there were some 8,000 village activists. Part-time guerrillas in the truest sense of the term, the activists commonly worked in the paddies by day and engaged in military pursuits at night. For the most part their ranks were filled with men considered either too young or too old for service with organized Viet Cong military units. Nevertheless, they played an important role in the struggle for South Vietnam's rural areas by providing various forms of support for larger Viet Cong formations. Living and working within the rural hamlets and villages as they did, the activists were a ready source of intelligence information for the Viet Cong. Often they served as porters and guides for main force units which had been assigned to operate within their locale. Otherwise, the activists were responsible for defending their particular villages against the government's military and police forces—a defense which normally took the form of harassment with mines and sniper fire.*

After early 1962 the activities of these Viet Cong military and paramilitary forces were carefully coordinated with Communist political activities on the national level by a Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN).** From its headquarters, be-

*The three-way division was the most commonly used method of categorizing the Communist forces. (See U.S. Army, *The Viet Cong*, p. I:52.) A USMAAG document published during this period, however, divided the Viet Cong into two somewhat broader categories—main forces and guerrillas. Both local force units and village activists were classified as guerrillas under this system. (USMAAG, Vietnam, *Tactics and Techniques of Counter-insurgent Operations*, p. II–5.) Other sources tended to make more elaborate divisions. (See Pike, *Viet Cong*.)

**COSVN apparently was established in March. Prior to this the NLF had functioned through two separate geographic headquarters—Interzone V, responsible for roughly the northern three-quarters of South Vietnam, and the NAMBO Interzone, responsible for the area roughly described by the forested hills and Mekong Delta physiographic regions.

lieved to have been located northeast of Saigon in Binh Duong Province, COSVN exercised direct control over six military regions (MRs). Designated MR–5 through MR–9 (arranged in a north to south pattern) with an additional Saigon-Gia Dinh Special Zone, the Communist military regions served essentially the same purpose as the government's corps tactical zones. Within these six regions COSVN utilized a province and district structure only slightly different from that of the Diem government to exercise administrative and military control. At each level within this organization a small, disciplined Communist political committee orchestrated the activities of its subordinate military units with the actions of its political apparatus.

To counter the strengthened NLF organization and to satisfy American demands that he adopt some form of national strategy, President Diem launched one of the most controversial large-scale undertakings of the war—the Strategic Hamlet Program. Instituted on an informal basis in the closing stages of 1961, the program became fully operative in mid-1962. Although heralded as a new concept, the campaign actually grew out of an existing program whose broad objective had been to bring improved economic and social conditions to South Vietnam's rural areas. Named the Agroville Program, this effort had been in effect since late 1959 under the direction of Ngo Dinh Nhu, the president's brother and principal advisor. Since its institution, however, the program had achieved little aside from the resettlement of many rural families into government constructed communities. Few meaningful reforms, either social or economic, had been realized. During the early 1960s, moreover, many of the Agrovilles had been victimized by the Viet Cong, who saw the developments as symbols of the government's presence in contested areas. By mid-1961, in an effort to protect the more remote Agrovilles, authorities in several provinces had begun fortifying the otherwise helpless population centers.

Concurrent with this evolution of the Agrovilles into fortified communities, Sir Robert G. K. Thompson, the head of a newly formed British Advisory Mission in Saigon, suggested that President Diem consider adopting a similar scheme with broader strategic objectives. Thompson, who had helped implement such an effort in Malaya in the 1950s during the struggle there against Communist insurgents, specifically proposed that the South Vietnamese integrate various economic and social programs into an effective campaign to reestablish its influence in the heavily populated Mekong Delta. This campaign, Thompson advised, "should lead by stages to a reorganization of the government machinery for directing and coordinating all action against the communists and the production of an overall strategic operational plan for the country as a whole. . . ." [1]

Under pressure from the U.S. Embassy to develop some sort of national strategy for countering the insurgency, President Diem accepted the concept of Thompson's proposal. Shortly thereafter, Diem named Ngo Dinh Nhu to head a campaign formally designated the Strategic Hamlet Program. Nhu was instructed to plan the program and to create a combined agency that would insure its coordination within the various government ministries. These instructions resulted in the creation (in February) of the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets. A counterpart American organization, the U.S. Interagency Committee for Province Rehabilitation, was formed in April to provide assistance to Nhu's agency.

With advice from Thompson and the U.S. Embassy, the Vietnamese formulated a program which in theory was to evolve in several rather distinct phases. First it would be necessary to select specific geographic areas wherein the Strategic Hamlet Program would be implemented. Once specific objective areas had been established, regular military units would initiate operations to clear those areas of Viet Cong formations. Following the completion of these operations RVNAF units would resettle the inhabitants of the area in fortified hamlets. Initially these hamlets were to be defended by Civil Guard units while regular forces continued screening operations in the surrounding countryside. In the final phase, Self Defense Corps units would assume responsibility for local security while regular units continued to screen Viet Cong forces from the developments. During this phase district civil authorities would initiate economic and social programs within the newly formed communities in an effort to recapture the allegiance of the local populace. Thus, in this final phase, it was expected that the Communist political infrastructure would be broken.

Following the pacification of a few contiguous hamlets, the same process was to be repeated over and over, in an expanding pattern. In this manner Diem hoped to expand the GVN's control progressively outward from the initial secure hamlets over large areas of the countryside. Ultimately the GVN intended to construct nearly 11,000 such protected communities in several of the country's most critical rural areas.

A principal shortcoming of this method of pacification was that the success of the entire program within a specific area depended on the successful completion of virtually every developmental phase in every strategic hamlet. Should the Communist infrastructure remain intact in even one hamlet, that hamlet could precipitate the collapse of the entire campaign by contaminating the surrounding communities in a geometric progression.

Given this critical requirement that all phases be accomplished in a deliberate and orderly manner, it was unfortunate that Nhu initiated the program in an uncoordinated fashion. By the first of the year, months before the appropriate American and South Vietnamese agencies had been formed to guide the program, the construction of hamlets had begun on a scale which already suggested a nationwide campaign. Furthermore, the government failed to test the plan in a pilot project such as Thompson (as well as U.S. advisors) had recommended. Instead, it launched rather extensive campaigns simultaneously in several traditional Communist strongholds during the spring of 1962.

Nevertheless, once formally initiated, the Strategic Hamlet Program constituted the government's first real effort to implement a concerted counterinsurgency strategy on a national scale. Regardless of its weaknesses and its somewhat abortive start, the program would serve as the context within which the Diem government would wage its battle with the Viet Cong during 1962 and most of 1963. From this military standpoint, moreover, Diem's adoption of the Strategic Hamlet Program marked somewhat of a watershed in the evolution of ground strategy in the Vietnam war. Inherent in its selection was the decision to opt for a "clear-and-hold" as opposed to a "search-and-destroy" strategy. In accordance with the dictates of the pacification campaign, RVNAF ground forces would focus primarily during the next two years on operations to clear Communist military formations from the more densely populated rural areas.

The Creation of MACV and Marine Advisory Division

The American military build-up called for by the Washington decisions of December 1961 was well underway as the new year opened. Several U.S. units introduced in the closing weeks of 1961 had already begun operations by January. These included two U.S. Army transport helicopter companies and a composite U.S. Air Force detachment. Designated FARM GATE and composed initially of 151 officers and men, the Air Force detachment had a dual mission of training VNAF elements and conducting attack sorties in support of President Diem's forces. The arrival of another U.S. Air Force unit, a C–123 transport squadron, another Army helicopter company, and an Army communications organization, the 3d Radio Research Unit, just after the first of the year raised the number of American military personnel serving on permanent assignment in Vietnam to over 3,000. Assigned to the Army's radio unit, which immediately began operations from Pleiku in II Corps Tactical Zone, were 42 Marines from the 1st Radio Company, FMF. Designated Detachment A, 1st Radio Company, these were the first U.S. Marines to participate in the ongoing build-up.

Thus far, however, the U.S. troops arriving in Vietnam were for combat support rather than advisory type duty. At a meeting held in Honolulu in mid-January, Secretary of Defense McNamara ordered the ranking American military officials concerned with Vietnam to make substantial increases in the number of advisors serving with the Vietnamese armed forces.

Less than a month after the Honolulu conference, a new U.S. command was created in Saigon to manage the expected influx of advisors and the intensified military assistance effort more efficiently. On 8 February, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV or MACV) supplanted the MAAG as the senior American command in the Republic of Vietnam. Its commander, Army General Paul D. Harkins (ComUSMACV), assumed direct responsibility for all U.S. military policy, operations, and assistance to President Diem's

government. Harkins was directly subordinate to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral Harry D. Felt, whose headquarters was in Hawaii.

The number of U.S. Marines assigned to MACV's staff indicated that they would play an important role in its operations. In all, 21 staff billets in the new command were allocated to the Marine Corps. The most important of these was the chief of staff billet. This assignment went to Major General Richard G. Weede, a veteran who had commanded an artillery battalion during the campaigns for Saipan and Okinawa during World War II. Later, in Korea, he had distinguished himself as the commander of the 5th Marines. Weede arrived in Saigon from Hawaii where he had commanded the 1st Marine Brigade since 1959. Other Marines joined General Harkins' command as Deputy Chief of Staff, J–2 and as branch chiefs for the J–3 through J–6 divisions. Two other positions assigned to Marine officers were the project officer for a Joint Operations Evaluation Group and a research and development project officer for a Department of Defense agency. Both of these were operationally controlled by the newly organized Military Assistance Command.

Major General Richard G. Weede, USMC, Chief of Staff, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. (USMC Photo A150562).

Under the new U.S. command arrangement, the old Military Assistance Advisory Group became subordinate to General Harkins' command. Headed by Major General Charles J. Timmes, U.S. Army, the MAAG was now responsible primarily for the advisory aspect of the assistance program. To accommodate the impending increases in the number of advisors, the MAAG's staff was restructured. Under its new table of organization, Marine officers were to serve as deputy chief of staff and head of the plans branch of the J–3 division. Later, in 1963, the MAAG's table of distribution would be modified with the effect that the chief of staff billet would be held by a Marine colonel. The first Marine to serve as General Timmes' chief of staff would be Colonel Earl E. Anderson, a much-decorated aviator who eventually would become the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps.

The reorganization of the MAAG brought about a dramatic change in the size and scope of the U.S. Marine advisory effort. The new table of organization included a provision for an 18-man Marine Advisory Division within the MAAG's Naval Section. The organizational charts for this division included advisor billets for a lieutenant colonel, a major, six captains, a gunnery sergeant, and four staff sergeants. Administrative positions were to make up the balance of the new organization.

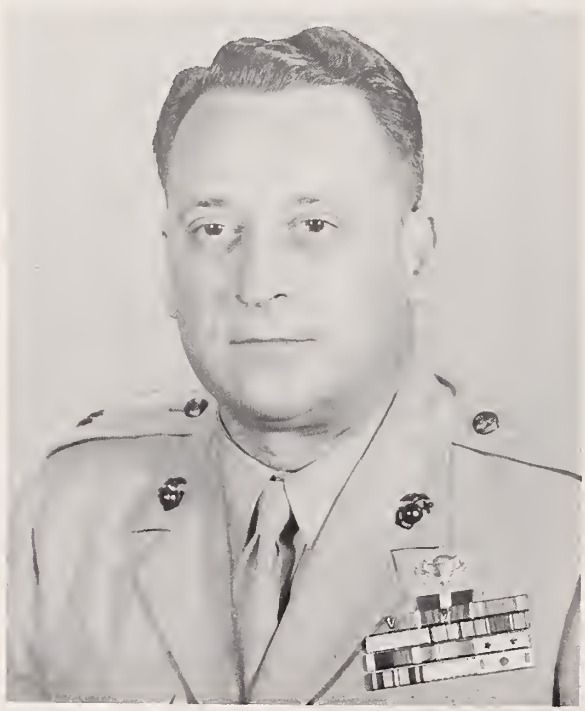
As had been the case previous to this expansion, the lieutenant colonel was to serve as the Senior Marine Advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. The inclusion of the major's billet was expected to enhance the overall effectiveness of the advisory division as he was to double as Assistant Senior Advisor and as senior artillery advisor. The gunnery sergeant was to assist in the artillery advisory duties. Of the six captains, four were to be assigned as advisors to VNMC infantry battalions while the two others were slated to advise on engineer and supply matters. The four logistics-trained staff sergeants were to be assigned as assistant infantry battalion advisors and were expected to free the officer advisors from direct involvement in time-consuming supply matters.

Marines required to man this enlarged advisory unit began arriving in Vietnam as early as February. All of the new officer advisors were graduates of either Junior School at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico or the U.S. Army Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Following

their assignments, but before departing for Vietnam, many advisors received schooling in military assistance operations. This normally included a five-month course of instruction in the French language, a requirement which more and more Marine advisors were beginning to question as a result of the Vietnamese desire to converse in their own language rather than French. Upon arrival in Saigon, the Marines were given two days of orientation briefings at MACV headquarters before assuming their jobs in the Marine Advisory Division.

Lieutenant Colonel Brown continued to serve as the Senior Marine Advisor and headed the new advisory division throughout the summer of 1962. In October he was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Clarence G. Moody, Jr., a veteran who held the Navy Cross for heroism as a company commander during the Korean War. Having served with the British Royal Marines following Korea, Moody was somewhat familiar with the problems involved in dealing with foreign military services.

Encouraged by both Brown and Moody, the U.S. Marine advisors participated in every combat operation undertaken by the VNMC during 1962. Prior to planned operations they helped their Vietnamese counterparts coordinate the more sophisticated means of support which became available as the American military build-up took hold. During planning phases, for example, they assisted with the development of detailed orders and helped plan for employing artillery fire and air support. If the impending operation was to be amphibious in nature, the Marine officers coordinated with the U.S. Navy advisors assigned to the supporting Vietnamese Navy units, thereby insuring that planning for embarkation had been accomplished. On occasion the advisors were required to coordinate helicopter support for the VNMC units—a task sometimes complicated by the Vietnamese Marines' lack of experience in heliborne operations. Unfortunately, the almost constant combat assignments being drawn by the handful of U.S. and VNAF helicopter units available in Vietnam made training in such operations impossible.



Lieutenant Colonel Clarence G. Moody, Jr., USMC, Senior Marine Advisor. (USMC Photo A412981).

Even more difficult were the advisor's responsibilities after their units deployed to combat. The U.S. Marines were experiencing the often frustrating task of actually searching out the elusive Viet Cong on a continuing daily basis. Additionally, the Americans found themselves faced with the unenviable task of advising Vietnamese officers, who, in some cases, had been fighting Communist guerrillas since the French-Indochina War. These circumstances presented a unique set of challenges for the advisors. For American officers with relatively little actual experience in this brand of warfare to offer tactical advice in a form acceptable to their Vietnamese counterparts demanded a combination of tact, patience, and subtle persuasive powers.

The U.S. Marine advisors quickly learned that success in this peculiar assignment depended largely on the degree of respect they commanded among the Vietnamese Marines. To help build this intangible yet vital foundation of mutual understanding and confidence, the Marine advisors stayed with their units in combat, sharing with the Vietnamese Marine the same foods, the same dangers, the same discomforts, and the same routines. The Marine advisors lived in U.S. bachelor quarters in Saigon when their respective battalions were in garrison. Nevertheless, they

spent much of this time at the Marine base camps, inspecting troops and equipment and making preparations for the battalion's next combat assignment. Among others, Lieutenant Colonels Brown and Moody viewed this continuous association with the Vietnamese Marines as the single most essential ingredient to a successful advisory program.

The Vietnamese Marine Corps, 1962

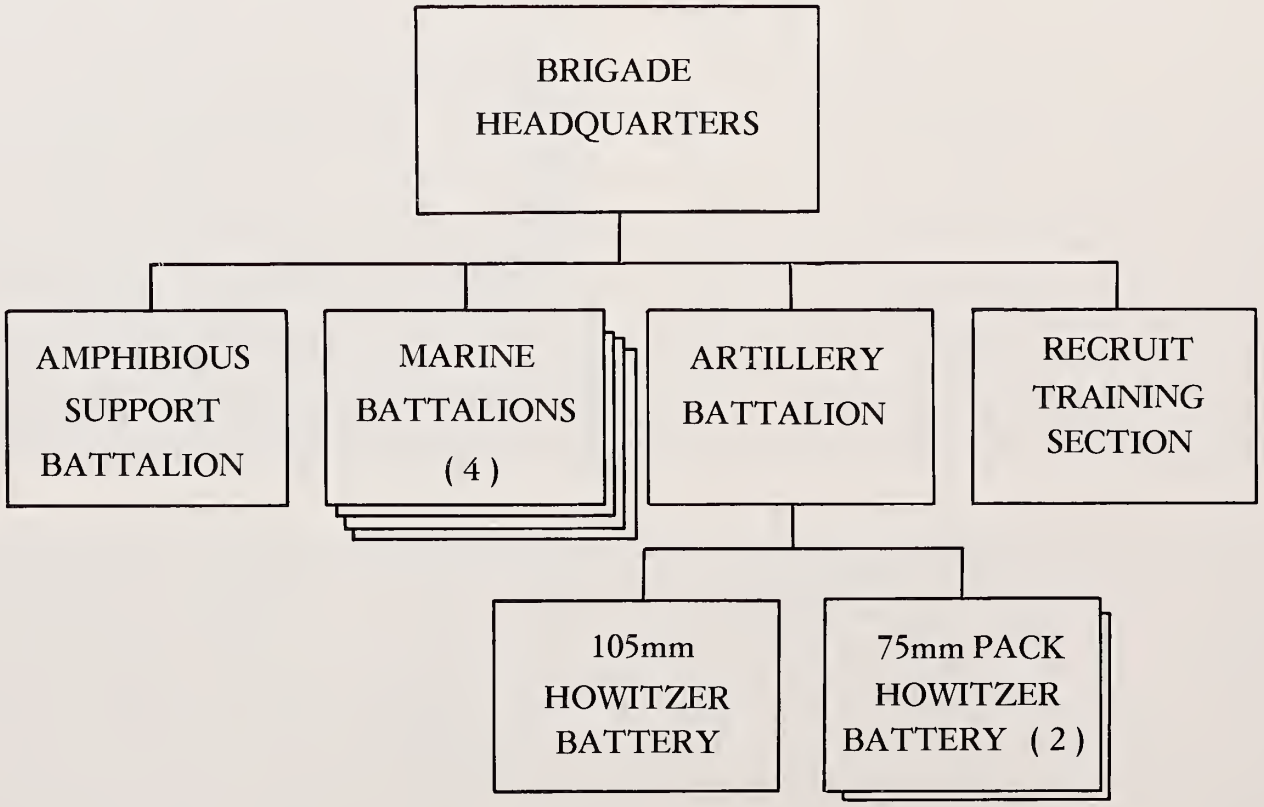
For the Vietnamese Marine Corps 1962 was characterized by expansion, redesignation, and continued combat operations against the Viet Cong. On 1 January the former Vietnamese Marine Group was redesignated the Vietnamese Marine Brigade and was enlarged to 5,483 officers and men. Under its new table of organization, the number of infantry battalions remained at four but two new battalions were added. One battery of eight 105mm howitzers, two batteries of eight 75mm pack howitzers, and a headquarters and service battery comprised an artillery battalion which was created to provide artillery fire support to the infantry units. An amphibious support battalion of 1,038 officers and men was also formed. This unit contained the personnel necessary to provide the entire Marine brigade with reconnaissance, communications, motor transport, medical, engineer, and training support. Lieutenant Colonel Khang continued in his position as Commandant of the expanded and restructured Vietnamese Marine Corps.

The infantry battalions of the Vietnamese Marine Brigade performed a variety of combat missions ranging from security duty around key government installations to helicopter landings in suspected Viet Cong redoubts during 1962. The four infantry battalions (the 4th Battalion became available for combat assignment at midyear) participated in 23 combat operations which involved 404 days in the field. These operations included 12 amphibious landings and eight heliborne assaults. With the exception of two howitzer batteries which saw some combat, the artillery battalion devoted the year to training. Supervised by Major Alfred J. Croft and Gunnery Sergeant William A. Loyko, their new Marine advisors, the Vietnamese artillerymen learned their skills in a number of field firing exercises conducted on ARVN artillery ranges.

In terms of casualties the VNMC battalions fought no major engagements with the Communists during the year. A typical operation was one conducted in An Xuyen, South Vietnam's southernmost province, early in the year. The 2d Battalion, which was assigned to the An Xuyen province chief for the period between 18 February and 26 April, conducted one helicopter landing, provided troop escorts for numerous truck convoys, and fought several minor engagements with the Viet Cong. Although the Vietnamese commander reported 112 enemy killed and another 40 wounded during the two-month assignment, the figures contradicted those of Captain Evan L. Parker, the Marine advisor, which placed the Viet Cong casualties at about 40 dead and 20 wounded. This difference, which was not uncommon, stemmed largely from the fact that the Marine advisors limited their reports to enemy dead and wounded actually sighted. Still, the conflicting reports sometimes led to tensions between the Vietnamese commander and the Marine advisor.

In other instances the Vietnamese Marine battalions were ordered to serve as the reserve force for one of the three corps tactical zones. The 1st Battalion, for example, accompanied by Captain Bradley S. Snell, assumed the mission as II Corps reserve on 16 May and remained in that role until mid-September. Based at Ban Me Thuot deep in the Central Highlands, the battalion provided security for government installations while remaining ready to react to enemy threats. As the corps reserve it conducted one heliborne operation and several search-type missions. In one of these searches the Vietnamese Marines uncovered and destroyed a Viet Cong small arms factory. During its assignment in II Corps, the 1st Battalion accounted for only four Viet Cong dead and one wounded while suffering 16 dead and 28 wounded. These statistics attested both to the grim effectiveness of enemy sniper fire and mines and to the enemy's elusiveness.

The newly activated 4th Battalion, advised by Captain Don R. Christensen, entered combat for the first time during an operation in Binh Thuan



VNMC (MARINE BRIGADE) TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 1 JANUARY 1962

AUTHORIZED STRENGTH 5,483

Vietnamese Marines search dense jungle for Viet Cong base areas. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Gott, USMC).

Province in the first week in August. Supported by Battery A (a 75mm howitzer unit) of the artillery battalion, it joined the 43d ARVN Infantry Regiment in an attempt to locate and destroy Viet Cong forces operating around Phan Thiet, the provincial capital, located on the coast 95 miles east of Saigon. Following the conclusion of this operation on 22 August, the Marine units reverted to the control of the Binh Thuan province chief. In this capacity they assisted in clearing and resettlement operations being conducted in conjunction with the Strategic Hamlet Program. Between 4 August and 15 October, when its assignment in the province ended, the 4th Battalion reported 12 Viet Cong killed and seven captured. Vietnamese Marine casualties were one killed and five wounded. During the assignment the Marines resettled some 600 civilians in fortified hamlets.[2]*

In the last week of September General David M. Shoup, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, arrived in Saigon to begin a four-day tour of South Vietnam. Shoup, who held the Medal of Honor for his actions as a regimental commander on Tarawa in World War II, was recognized as one of President Kennedy's most trusted military advisors. Acting in his role as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Commandant was scheduled to visit a number of U.S. and South Vietnamese installations, including several strategic hamlets.

*Major Croft, the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor during this period, later recalled that province chiefs tended to misuse the Marine units by assigning them unproductive missions such as static security. (Col Alfred J. Croft, Comments on 2d Draft MS, Whitlow, "Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964," hereafter *Croft Comments*.)

NORTH VIETNAM
DA NANG
THAILAND
SOUTH CHINA SEA
I CTZ
Mekong River
LAOS
XXX
QUI NHON
CAMBODIA
II CTZ
Mekong River
NHA TRANG
XXX
N
SAIGON
III CTZ
SOC TRANG
CORPS TACTICAL ZONES
1962
MILES
0 25 50 75 100
0 25 50 75 100
KILOMETERS

After a series of briefings at MACV and MAAG headquarters in Saigon, the Commandant and his party journeyed by automobile to the base camp of the 3d Vietnamese Marine Battalion at Thu Duc on the outskirts of the capital. There, accompanied by Lieutenant Colonels Brown and Khang, Shoup reviewed a Vietnamese Marine honor guard and inspected the 3d Battalion. Impressed with the units he had seen, General Shoup commended President Diem on the status of his Marine Brigade. "From my observation," he wrote from Washington, "the Vietnamese Marine Corps is in an excellent state of readiness from the standpoint of equipment as well as the degree of training of its members." "Indeed," he added, "your Corps of Marines seemed to be a splendid and competent fighting organization." [3]

The Commandant was less complimentary of the Strategic Hamlet Program. After visiting several of the developments, he concluded that the government's effort to concentrate the Vietnamese civilians into defended communities was counterproductive to the program's stated objective of winning the allegiance of the rural population. As Shoup reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff upon his return to Washington, the forced resettlement of the peasants from their native hamlets and villages into what amounted to fortified camps seemed to be generating antagonism rather than good will.[4]

At the close of 1962 Vietnamese Marine commanders reported a total of 192 Viet Cong killed, 77 wounded, and another 158 taken prisoner. U.S. Marine advisors felt that even these moderate figures were inflated. They estimated that only about 98 enemy soldiers had been killed, 27 wounded, and roughly half as many actual Viet Cong captured as had been reported by their Vietnamese Marine counterparts. The Vietnamese Marines also had failed to inflict any serious damage on the enemy's logistic system, capturing only 16,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, 45 grenades, 31 mines, and 50 individual weapons, a printing press, two typewriters, several motors, and an assortment of medical supplies.[5]

Some Conclusions

In retrospect, 1962 bears assessment as an important watershed in the chronicle of U.S. Marine activities in Vietnam. As the year began only three Marine advisors and a handful of embassy guards were serving in the Republic. The initial months, however, brought a dramatic expansion of that role, both in terms of numbers and responsibilities. By March Marines were functioning on MAAG and MACV staffs in Saigon, in U.S. Army communications facilities in the Central Highlands, and throughout the provinces where Vietnamese Marine units operated. Their contributions to the war effort, therefore, were broad and varied, ranging from high level planning to infantry advisory duties. The Marine role had expanded in rough proportion to the broad-based expansion of the overall U.S. military assistance program. In this connection, Marine contributions tended to be concealed within the context of the American assistance effort. Still, by mid-1962 it could be said that the Marines in Vietnam were leaving the impact of their service on virtually every stage of the ground war.

PART II

MARINE HELICOPTERS GO TO WAR

CHAPTER 5

SHUFLY at Soc Trang

The Decision—Deployment to Soc Trang—Mekong Delta Combat Support Operations—Preparations and Redeployment—Accomplishments

One of the most important developments in the chronicle of U.S. Marine activities in South Vietnam during the early 1960s occurred shortly after the creation of MACV. In mid-April 1962, a Marine medium helicopter squadron was deployed to the Mekong Delta to provide support for the Government of Vietnam forces in their battle with the Communist guerrillas. The significance of the squadron's arrival went beyond the added mobility that it afforded those Vietnamese units attempting to hold the rice producing delta region. Coinciding as it did with the increases in the number of Marines serving on the MACV staff and under the MAAG, its arrival indicated that the Marine role would expand in direct proportion to the widening U.S. effort to defend the Republic of Vietnam.

The Decision

The decision to deploy the Marine aviation unit to the combat zone originated in the immediate aftermath of General Taylor's report to President Kennedy. On 17 January 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CinCPac), Admiral Harry D. Felt, to prepare for increased operations in South Vietnam. This order implied that the Pacific command should stand ready to deploy additional helicopter units to Diem's republic in the event that it became necessary to augment the Army companies already operating there. (By now the number of Army helicopter companies in South Vietnam stood at three.) CinCPac was also instructed to explore South Vietnam's requirements for additional helicopter units beyond the Army companies already present.[1]

Shortly afterward, Admiral Felt advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff that a valid requirement for additional helicopter support did exist in the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam. He recommended that a fourth U.S. Army light helicopter company be deployed to the area. Included in the admiral's recommendation was a proposal to support the aviation unit with a composite maintenance, avionics, and medical group.[2]

Admiral Felt's recommendations were approved by the Secretary of Defense on 6 March. The Joint Chiefs immediately assigned the responsibility for providing the support package and helicopter unit to the Army. In turn, Army authorities alerted the 33d Transportation Light Helicopter Company at Fort Ord, California for the move. Its departure date was set for 18 April.[3]

Unknown to the officers and men of the alerted unit, the plans for its deployment to combat were being reconsidered at the time the orders were received. Two days before Admiral Felt's recommendation reached the Joint Chiefs, a proposal to augment Army helicopter units with Marine pilots had been advanced by General Timmes, the MAAG chief. This proposal triggered a brief but eventful debate within U.S. military circles. With General Harkins' concurrence, Timmes recommended that nine Marine helicopter pilots be assigned to the Army aviation units in Vietnam for periods of 60 to 90 days. This arrangement, he pointed out, would enable the Marine pilots to become familiar with the nature of the combat support operations in South Vietnam and would provide them with transitional training in the Army's Piasecki-built tandem-rotored H–21 helicopter (nicknamed the "Flying Banana").[4]

Admiral Felt turned to the Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), Lieutenant General Alan Shapley, for his comments on the MAAG chief's plan. Shapley in turn instructed Major General Carson A. Roberts, the Commanding General, Aircraft, FMFPac to study the proposal

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and to frame a set of recommendations. Roberts, who had been selected for promotion to lieutenant general and was scheduled to relieve Shapley as Commanding General, FMFPac, found the prospect of Marine aviators participating in combat support operations in Vietnam appealing but felt that the proposal under review had some definite disadvantages. He pointed out that under Timmes' plan the Marine pilots would be flying a type of helicopter unfamiliar to them instead of the ones they would operate if the Marine squadrons were later deployed to Vietnam. Furthermore, General Roberts warned that the piecemeal assignment of his pilots would reduce the combat readiness of the unit from which they would be drawn.[5]

At Roberts' suggestion, General Shapley offered CinCPac a counterproposal which he believed would benefit both the South Vietnamese government and the Marine Corps. He suggested that a complete Marine medium helicopter squadron from Marine Aircraft Group 16 (MAG–16), 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW) and supporting elements be moved from Okinawa to the war zone. The Marine squadron, operating 24 HUS–1s (a single-rotor, Sikorsky-built transport helicopter later known as the UH–34D) would replace the Army helicopter company at Da Nang in the northernmost corps tactical zone, I Corps. The Army unit would then be freed for redeployment southward into either II or III Corps Tactical Zones.

General Shapley emphasized several advantages which he saw in this plan. First, it would provide additional helicopter support for the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces while concurrently providing an entire Marine helicopter squadron with an opportunity to gain first-hand experience in a counterguerrilla environment. It would also provide Marine Corps units with operational experience in I Corps, the area to which they would be committed if standing contingency plans were later executed. Finally, Shapley explained that his proposal offered an almost entirely self-sufficient aviation unit which could be supported administratively and logistically by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. The unit would require only minimal support from the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.[6]

On the same day that he had heard the Marine commander's proposal, Admiral Felt received a message from Admiral John H. Sides, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, which strongly advised that Roberts' plan be implemented.[7] Admiral Felt then solicited General Harkins' opinion on the matter. He reminded the MACV commander that the proposed deployment would provide the Marines with operational experience in an area where they might some day be committed. The admiral further pointed out that the location of a Marine helicopter unit at Da Nang would enable the Army aviation companies to move south into one of the other corps tactical zones—a move that would facilitate the logistical support of those units by shortening their supply lines.[8]

Harkins generally concurred with Admiral Felt's viewpoint. He noted that the more powerful Marine HUS helicopter (Sea Horse) could be expected to out perform the Army's H–21 in the higher elevations around Da Nang. He also felt that the Marines, with their seaborne supply network, were better equipped to cope with the logistics problems in the more isolated northern reaches of South Vietnam. But he objected to the deployment of the Marine unit to Da Nang on the basis that the relocation of the Army's 93d Helicopter Company from I Corps in the immediate future would disrupt a series of operations which were already underway in I Corps. As an alternative, General Harkins proposed that the Marine helicopters be located initially at Soc Trang in the Mekong Delta. Later, when the tempo of operations in the northern corps tactical zone permitted, it could exchange places with the Army unit at Da Nang.[9]

One Army general raised a specific objection to the proposal that the Marine squadron be deployed from Okinawa. General James F. Collins, the Commander in Chief, U.S. Army, Pacific (CinCUSArPac) argued that the presence of the Marine helicopters at Soc Trang would introduce yet "another supply and maintenance feature into the III Corps area." [10] This argument was followed by the recommendation that the Army's 81st Light Helicopter Company, then based in Hawaii, be ordered to the Mekong Delta. The 81st, General Collins contended, was already trained in troop transportation operations in jungle terrain.

General David M. Shoup, the Marine Corps Commandant, who approved the FMFPac plan in concept, harbored one reservation regarding General Roberts' proposals. His concern stemmed

from the possibility that the Marine Corps might be required to replace the squadron from Okinawa with another in order to maintain the level of operational forces available to CinCPac—an eventuality which would upset long-range Marine Corps deployment schedules. General Shoup indicated that he, too, would oppose the deployment of a Marine helicopter squadron to South Vietnam if this proved to be the case.[11]

At this juncture in the debate, Admiral Felt journeyed to Saigon to discuss the matter more thoroughly with General Harkins. Following consultations, the two commanders jointly communicated their recommendations to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 14 March. They advised that it would be more desirable to deploy one of the Marine helicopter squadrons from Okinawa than either the Army unit already on alert in California or the one in Hawaii. This decision, Felt and Harkins informed the Joint Chiefs, was influenced heavily by the readiness posture of the various units under consideration. A Marine squadron, they pointed out, could be on station and ready for combat operations by 15 April—three days before the company already alerted by the Army could depart California.[12]

Admiral Felt and General Harkins then dealt with the CinCUSARPac contention that additional supply problems would be created by the deployment of a Marine unit to the Mekong Delta. The Pacific commanders advised that, in their opinion, the logistical support "can be handled relatively easily by [the] Marines." [13] They added that should requirements for a fifth helicopter unit arise in South Vietnam, the Army's 81st Helicopter Company would be selected for the assignment. It would be replaced in Hawaii by the 33d Transportation Light Helicopter Company from Fort Ord. Finally, Admiral Felt and General Harkins recommended that the Marine squadron be deployed initially to the Mekong Delta area of III Corps Tactical Zone (III CTZ). Later, when operational conditions in I Corps were more favorable, the Marines could replace the Army helicopter unit there.

After meeting to discuss the matter, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the entire package of recommendations on 16 March. Admiral Felt immediately ordered the Pacific Fleet to deploy a Marine helicopter squadron to South Vietnam and authorized direct liaison between the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and ComUSMACV. In turn, Admiral Sides, the Commander of the Pacific Fleet, notified the Commander, Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral William A. Schoech, of the decision and directed him to take appropriate action.[14]

Deployment to Soc Trang

The Commanding General of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, Major General John P. Condon, a Michigan native who had earned a Distinguished Flying Cross and three Legions of Merit for service during World War II and Korea, was informed of the impending deployment on 22 March. At the time, Condon, his staff, and elements of his command were participating in SEATO exercise TULUNGAN in the Philippines. The arrival of the orders proved timely for most of the affected units were in close proximity to the wing commander. As the Marine helicopter squadron and its supporting elements were scheduled to arrive in Vietnam just two weeks after the SEATO exercise ended, preparations for the move were begun immediately. General Condon quickly dispatched several officers to Saigon to establish liaison with USMACV.

The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing fortunately possessed a background which facilitated the rapid preparations for the movement. Since August of the previous year General Condon's command regularly had deployed a medium helicopter squadron (HMM) and its supporting elements with the Special Landing Force (SLF), a Marine air-ground team embarked on board the Seventh Fleet's Amphibious Ready Group. Since 1961 this naval task force had cruised Southeast Asian waters ready to implement U.S. contingency plans. These deployments had given the Marines of the wing a reservoir of experience which enabled them to make maximum use of the short period of time available for planning.

By 30 March, the wing's planning had progressed to the stage that General Condon could provide the Commander of the Seventh Fleet with specific recommendations for the entire operation. The general concept of the plan was that Task Unit 79.3.5, under the command of a Marine colonel, was to be built around a Marine medium helicopter squadron which was participating in Operation

Major General John P. Condon, USMC, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. (USMC Photo A420792).

TULUNGAN. This task unit, code named SHUFLY, was to occupy an old Japanese-built landing strip near Soc Trang, a small town located about 85 miles southwest of Saigon in Ba Xuyen Province. Situated only 20 miles from the coast, Soc Trang possessed one of the few hard surfaced runways in the area. Condon informed the Seventh Fleet commander of the arrangements which his liaison officers had made during their trip to Saigon. An ARVN infantry battalion and two 4.2-inch mortar companies were to assume the defense of the air strip at Soc Trang the same day that the Marines began landing.

The Marine general then proceeded to outline the chain of command and method of support which he considered best for the Marine task unit. SHUFLY, he suggested, should be under the operational control of ComUSMACV but should remain under the administrative control of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Most of its logistic support, the wing commander thought, could come through normal Marine and Navy channels with fuels, lubricant oils, rations, and ammunition, being the exceptions. Rations and ammunition were to be provided by MACV, while fuels would be supplied by private Vietnamese distributers operating under contracts with the U.S. government.

Next, General Condon explained to Admiral Schoech his desires for the organization of the task unit. He felt that SHUFLY would function best if organized into three distinct task elements. First, he proposed that a headquarters be formed under the command of Colonel John F. Carey, a veteran Marine aviator who had been awarded the Navy Cross for heroism during the battle for Midway. Carey was currently serving as Chief of Staff of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. This headquarters, General Condon advised, should consist of eight officers and six enlisted men. The second element of the task unit, the wing commander continued, would be Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 (HMM–362), reinforced, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Archie J. Clapp. The squadron, whose normal complement was 63 officers and 196 enlisted Marines, was to be augmented by 50 additional maintenance personnel. Its equipment would include 24 HUS helicopters (which under normal operating conditions could lift eight to 12 combat-loaded Vietnamese troops), three Cessna single-engine OE-1 observation aircraft, one R4D transport aircraft, and supplemental maintenance equipment. Prior to its deployment, HMM–362 would exchange its helicopters for recently overhauled aircraft in order to reduce maintenance problems once operations in Vietnam began. SHUFLY's third element would be a sub unit of Marine Air Base Squadron 16 (MABS–16). Designated Task Element 79.3.5.2, it would be commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William W. Eldridge. Navy medical, dental, and chaplain personnel would be included in the sub unit's 193 enlisted men and 18 officers.

The wing commander intended to provide the MABS–16 sub unit with a Tactical Airfield Fuel Dispensing System (TAFDS) and a Marine Airfield Traffic Control Unit (MATCU). The traffic control unit would be equipped with Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) and Ground Control Approach (GCA) systems which would enable the helicopter squadron to conduct landings during periods of reduced visibility.[15]

Colonel Carey, the task unit commander, was to be assigned responsibility for liaison with

MACV and military authorities in III Corps, the tactical zone which encompassed the entire Mekong Delta and the transition zone between the delta and the highlands. All operational planning, security, external communications, and administrative matters also were to fall under his cognizance. This arrangement would allow Lieutenant Colonel Clapp and his squadron to concentrate on daily flight operations and aircraft maintenance. Lieutenant Colonel Eldridge's MABS-16 sub unit would be responsible for all normal base support and airfield operations.[16]

General Condon's report to Admiral Schoech concluded with a rough outline of the schedule for the task unit's deployment. On 9 April—only eight days after the termination of the SEATO exercise in the Philippines—Marine transport aircraft from the 1st MAW, augmented by three transports from the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing (3d MAW), would begin airlifting the task unit headquarters and the MABS-16 detachment from Okinawa. The Marine general anticipated that all "housekeeping" facilities would be in position at Soc Trang within five days. Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's HMM-362 would fly into Soc Trang from the amphibious assault ship (helicopter carrier) USS *Princeton* (LPH-5) on the morning of 15 April. The proposal that the helicopters be flown ashore satisfied a Department of Defense requirement that conspicuous unloading activities were to be avoided in the Saigon area.

Admiral Schoech approved the 1st MAW's proposed plan on 3 April and ordered Task Unit 79.3.5 to be transferred to General Harkins' command on 15 April. He then instructed the Commander, Task Group 76.5 (the Amphibious Ready Group) to provide SHUFLY with whatever supply and administrative support it might require for the movement. At the same time the fleet commander ordered appropriate subordinate commanders to provide an escort of destroyers for the USS *Princeton* and an inconspicuous air cover when the LPH arrived and began unloading HMM-362. Accordingly, the covering aircraft were instructed not to approach within 20 miles of South Vietnam unless the situation around Soc Trang endangered the Marine helicopters.[17]

The day following Schoech's approval of the Marine plan, the carrier task unit was formed to transport HMM-362 to South Vietnam. SHUFLY was activated simultaneously and given orders which reflected General Condon's planning. Colonel Carey was instructed to establish his headquarters at the Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan, in order to prepare for the deployment. The task unit commander was advised that he would receive more detailed instructions relative to administration and logistics at a later date.

Colonel Carey's task group headquarters in Japan had only one week in which to complete preparations for the move to the Republic of Vietnam. His staff's responsibility for coordinating between units located at Atsugi, Japan, and Futema, Okinawa, made this task even more difficult. Carey's officers worked out the details of the airlift with the staff of Marine Aerial Refueler-Transport Squadron 152 (VMGR-152), the GV-1* unit assigned to carry the MABS-16 sub unit and the task unit headquarters to Soc Trang.

The airlift portion of the movement began as scheduled on 9 April with the MABS-16 detachment being transported from Futema directly to Soc Trang. At 0800 Colonel Carey and part of his staff landed at Soc Trang in a twin-engine Douglas R4D Skytrain. As planned, the 400-man ARVN battalion had already established a perimeter around the airfield. Using the R4D's radio, the crew provided landing instructions for the GV-1s of VMGR-152 and VMGR-352 which began landing and unloading their cargoes at half hour intervals. Several key American and Vietnamese military officers were on hand to watch the lead elements of SHUFLY arrive. Major General Condon, the 1st MAW commander, flew the first GV-1 into Soc Trang but departed after the aircraft had been unloaded. General Harkins and Brigadier General Le Van Nghiem, the Vietnamese commander of III Corps, also made appearances at the airstrip to welcome Colonel Carey and his Marines.

Lieutenant Colonel Eldridge's MABS-16 detachment began readying the airfield for HMM-362's arrival shortly after the first transport aircraft had unloaded. To serve as living spaces the Marines raised 75 strongback tents, all with plywood decks. They set up a water purification system and began trucking water from the town of Soc Trang, about two and a half miles away. Within two days, 9,000 gallons of water had been purified. Other con-

*The GV-1 (later KC-130), a four-engine, turbo-prop refueler-transport built by Lockheed, is the Marine refueling version of the Air Force C-130.

veniences improved the camp's living conditions. A field laundry and a mess hall were set up and by 12 April, hot meals were being served to the Marines. A post office began operations and telephones were installed to connect living and working areas.

By 14 April, the day before HMM–362 was scheduled to arrive at Soc Trang, most of the airfield facilities were ready to support flight operations. An old hangar, which had been constructed by the Japanese during their World War II occupation of Indochina, had been repaired to house some of the squadron's aircraft and equipment. The MABS–16 communications section was operational and had established radio and teletype links with MACV in Saigon and MAG–16 on Okinawa. The TAFDS had been assembled and filled with aviation fuel and MATCU–68, the air traffic control unit assigned to SHUFLY, was prepared to control flight operations.

The Amphibious Ready Group (TG 76.5) steamed from Okinawa on 10 April with HMM–362, its reinforcements, and HMM–261 embarked on the USS *Princeton*. The task group arrived off the coast of South Vietnam in the early morning hours of 15 April. At dawn Lieutenant Colonel Clapp, who had seen action as a fighter pilot during the Iwo Jima and Okinawa campaigns in World War II, led the first flight of helicopters from the deck of the *Princeton*. The operation proceeded smoothly with aircraft from both squadrons ferrying HMM–362's equipment inland to the Soc Trang airstrip. Far out at sea, jets of the Seventh Fleet orbited, ready to provide protection to the Marine helicopters. They were not needed, however, as the Viet Cong made no effort to oppose the movement. By mid-afternoon the airlift of HMM–362's personnel and equipment to the Soc Trang airfield had been completed. HMM–261 returned to the *Princeton* where it continued to function as the helicopter element of the Special Landing Force.

The day after arriving at Soc Trang, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's squadron, nicknamed "Archie's Angels," was prepared to support the ARVN. Since the squadron's combat support was not required immediately, the pilots and crews began flying missions to familiarize themselves with their new surroundings. They learned that their operations were to be conducted over the vast expanse of South Vietnam which stretched from just north and east of Saigon to the nation's southernmost tip, the Ca Mau Peninsula, and from the South China Sea westward to the Cambodian border. Their initial flights over the Mekong Delta revealed a predominantly flat and monotonous landscape. Parched by the long dry season, the dusty brown rice paddies stood in sharp contrast with the verdant mangrove swamps which abounded near major streams and along the coast. Numerous hamlets, most enclosed by dense hedgerows and treelines, were scattered across the countryside. Thousands of canals and trails and a few crude roads completed the rural landscape in which the Viet Cong guerrilla thrived. Larger towns, such as Soc Trang, Can Tho (located about 80 miles southwest of Saigon), and My Tho (located about half way between the capital and Can Tho) were under the control of the Government of Vietnam.

While the pilots and crews of HMM–362 were acquainting themselves with the geography of the Mekong Delta, Colonel Carey and his staff met in Saigon with U.S. and Vietnamese officers from the MACV and III Corps headquarters. There, they established liaison with the three ARVN divisions subordinate to General Nhgiem's III Corps—the 21st, the 7th, and the 5th—and discussed operational matters. After several conferences, the final details of the command arrangements were completed. It was agreed that all Marine missions would require the approval of MACV, III Corps, and the task unit commander. This arrangement would enable General Harkins' command to retain actual operational control of the Marine helicopters even though they would be supporting III Corps exclusively. Final approval of all mission requests for Marine support would rest with the Joint Operations Center (JOC) at JGS headquarters in Saigon. Manned by U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, ARVN, and VNAF officers, this agency was part of a recently instituted Tactical Air Support System, the purpose of which was to provide positive control over all military aircraft in South Vietnam. To insure maximum coordination at lower echelons, Marine liaison officers were assigned to the corps headquarters and to the 21st ARVN Division. It was anticipated that this division, headquartered at Can Tho, only 35 miles northwest of Soc Trang, would require more Marine helicopter support than

Lieutenant Colonel Archie Clapp (second from left), HMM-362 squadron commander, Major General John Condon (fourth from left), Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and Colonel John Carey (extreme right), task unit commander, confer briefly after arriving at Soc Trang. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kizer, USMC).

the other divisions that were operating within the corps tactical zone.*

While operational planning was underway, the MABS–16 Marines set about to improve the newly occupied compound. Two diesel-powered generators were put into operation and began furnishing electrical power for the camp. The utilities section, which maintained the generators, then began installing electrical wiring throughout the compound. Toilet and shower facilities were constructed to accommodate the Marines.

Measures were also taken during this interlude to strengthen the airfield's defenses. Expecting that the Viet Cong might attempt to infiltrate the Marine position, Colonel Carey created a 40-man security unit to protect the inner camp and flight lines. This unit, composed of men from MABS–16 and HMM–362 and responsible to a permanent sergeant-of-the-guard, maintained roving patrols and security posts during hours of darkness. A network of concertina wire, trip flares, and machine gun emplacements provided additional protection around the helicopters and living area. Attack alerts were conducted periodically to coordinate the ARVN's outer defenses and the Marine guard within the perimeter.

Within less than two weeks after the first Marines had arrived at Soc Trang, the camp had been adequately prepared to support sustained combat helicopter operations. In addition, defenses had been established and the lines of logistical support from MACV had been opened. Food and

*I and II Corps had their own agencies within the corps headquarters for control of air assets whereas III CTZ relied directly on the JOC. Under this arrangement, I Corps and II Corps were required to pass mission requests for air support on to the JOC.

CAMBODIA
Mekong River
LOC NINH
III
XXX
II
BIEN HOA
SAIGON
CHAU PHU
Mekong River
LONG XUYEN
SA DEC
VINH LONG
MY THO
GO CONG
VUNG TAU
Cape St. Jacques
CAN THO
SOC TRANG
CA MAU
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Ca Mau Peninsula
N
III CORPS TACTICAL ZONE
1962
MILES
0
50
100
0
50
100
150
KILOMETERS

water were readily available. All necessary liaison with the Vietnamese units to be supported had been accomplished. Pilots and crews had gained a rudimentary knowledge of the area in which they would fly and SHUFLY's entire command structure had undergone a one week "shake down" in which it had proven sound.

Mekong Delta Combat Support Operations

Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's squadron began combat operations on Easter Sunday, 22 April, exactly one week after arriving in the Republic of Vietnam. The unit's first combat assignment was to assist the Army's Saigon-based 57th Helicopter Company in an operation code named LOCKJAW. The American helicopters were to support the ARVN 7th Division which was headquartered at My Tho, 53 miles northeast of Soc Trang. The Marine helicopters, which departed Soc Trang at 0900, flew 29 sorties and lifted 400 Vietnamese soldiers without incident during the course of their first operation.

Unlike the U.S. Army helicopters already operating in other parts of South Vietnam, the Marine HUS–1s were not armed with machine guns during their initial operations from Soc Trang. Prior to their deployment, the Marine commanders had reasoned that weapons mounted in the cargo hatch would hinder loading and unloading during critical periods while the helicopters were in landing zones. Additionally, armed aircraft would tend to present a more hostile appearance to Vietnamese civilians, thereby providing the Viet Cong ready-made material for their anti-American propaganda themes. The only weapons on board the helicopters, therefore, were the individual side arms and two M3A1 .45 caliber submachine guns carried by the crew members. The automatic weapons enabled Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's men to return fire at short ranges and would also enhance their survival capabilities in the event an aircraft was forced down in unsecure territory.*

Once HMM–362 began combat flight operations the tempo of activities at Soc Trang quickened. The same day that SHUFLY helicopters participated in the coordinated helilift from My Tho, an HUS was called upon to evacuate an American advisor from Vinh Long, 46 miles north of Soc Trang. The following day the first combined operation involving Vietnamese Marine ground forces and U.S. Marine helicopters was conducted. A company of Vietnamese Marines was helilifted into a threatened government outpost south of the town of Ca Mau, located near the southern tip of South Vietnam, to provide security while HMM–362's helicopters evacuated the 57-man garrison.

On 24 April, 16 Marine helicopters supported the 21st ARVN Division in Operation NIGHTINGALE conducted near Can Tho. In this operation 591 ARVN troops were lifted into eight landing zones along two canals where a large group of Viet Cong had been reported. Shortly after the first wave of the assault force landed, a vicious small arms fight erupted. HMM–362 suffered its first combat damage when a helicopter was forced down after its oil line was punctured by enemy fire. An accompanying HUS quickly landed and retrieved the crew. Four other helicopters proceeded to the forward loading site, picked up a Marine repair team and enough ARVN troops to protect the team while it worked, and returned to the downed aircraft. The mechanics completed their repairs in two hours after which the crew returned the helicopter to Soc Trang. The security force was then lifted out of the area.

Despite the damage suffered by the Marine aircraft, the Can Tho operation apparently achieved some success. The Viet Cong reportedly suffered 70 dead and lost three prisoners to the South Vietnamese while the ARVN units lost only three killed and six wounded. The Marines of HMM–362, moreover, had responded to a new challenge by demonstrating that they could recover helicopters which had been forced to land in insecure territory. Although the principle of providing security while accomplishing field repairs had been employed previously by the Army helicopter companies, the Can Tho operation of 24 April marked the first time the Marines had been required to use the technique.

HMM–362 again joined the Army's 57th Helicopter Company for a coordinated troop lift on 25 April. This time the objective was the small town of Chau Doc on the Bassac River near the

*By the summer the new light weight AR–15, the forerunner of the M–16, would replace the M3A1 "greaseguns." Near the end of the year, however, the Leatherneck crews were carrying M–14 rifles, the standard U.S. 7.62mm infantry weapon of this period.

Aerial view of Soc Trang airstrip. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kizer, USMC).

Cambodian border which had been raided and burned by a force whose identity was undetermined. Fourteen Marine helicopters transported 168 troops from the 21st ARVN Division to the scene of the incident while two other squadron aircraft lifted the Deputy Commander of III Corps, the 21st Division Commander, and the Senior U.S. Advisor in III Corps, Colonel Daniel B. Potter, Jr., U.S. Army, to the village. The landing was uncontested as the marauding band had fled across the international border into Cambodia.

The conditions which confronted HMM–362 in the Mekong Delta during its first weeks of combat operations encouraged the squadron's pilots to experiment with new tactics. One such instance occurred in the first week of May in Ba Xuyen Province when the province chief requested that the Marine helicopters support his Civil Guard company in a raid on a fortified Viet Cong village about 12 miles southwest of Soc Trang. Because the objective was located so near the Soc Trang airfield, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp ordered an unusual technique used for approaching the landing zone. The flight would rendezvous over Soc Trang at tree-top level and proceed to the objective with the flight leader slightly to the rear and above the formation. From this vantage point the flight leader could keep the other aircraft in sight and exercise better control over each element of the flight. The success of the new procedure led Lieutenant Colonel Clapp to remark later that the technique was similar to "calling the plays from the grandstand." [18] It became another tactic available for the squadron's future use.

In terms of lessons learned, HMM–362's most significant operation during its initial month of combat support came on 9 May. Twenty-three helicopters and two OE–1 observation aircraft launched from Ca Mau at 1100 for an assault on Cai Ngai, a Viet Cong-controlled village 21 miles to the south. At 1200 the helicopters began landing the ARVN troops in six landing zones which had been attacked only five minutes earlier by Vietnamese Air Force fighter bombers. Firing broke out even before the Vietnamese troops could jump from the helicopters. During this clash eight of the Marine aircraft were hit by small arms fire and two Vietnamese troops were wounded while still on board. One HUS, struck in the oil return line, was forced to land a few miles from the objective. Troops were flown in quickly to establish a perimeter around the downed aircraft while repairs were made. After the temporary repairs had been completed, its crew flew the helicopter to Ca Mau, where it remained until more extensive work could be accomplished. The other aircraft, including an OE–1, suffered only superficial damage and continued to support the ARVN operation.

From this encounter with the Viet Cong, the Marine pilots learned that air strikes conducted just prior to a helicopter landing in the heavily populated delta country tended to disclose the location of the landing zone to the enemy. In this instance the Communists had been able to reach the landing zone in the few minutes which elapsed between the last air strike and the arrival of the Marine helicopters. Following this experience, the Marines would no longer allow VNAF air strikes on landing zones prior to operations in the flat delta region.*

The Americans and Vietnamese, however, soon learned to use fixed-wing aircraft to support helicopter operations in another manner. By mid-June, FARM GATE T–28 Trojans (a single-engine two-seat trainer built by North American) modified to carry bombs, rockets, and machine guns were flying escort missions for the Marine helicopter squadron. This particular aircraft could fly slowly enough to cruise with the HUS yet fast enough to deliver an air strike en route to the objective and then catch up with the helicopter formation. Normally an element of two T–28s accompanied the helicopters and were used primarily to attack targets near the landing zone after the ARVN troops were on the ground. The placement of an American pilot-instructor and a Vietnamese student in the T–28, a requirement imposed by MACV, helped avert language problems which invariably developed when coordinating ARVN ground operations and U.S. air operations. The effectiveness of the escort tactic increased as the Marine and Air Force pilots became accustomed to planning, coordinating, and executing the missions.

The Marines quickly learned the value of utilizing the OE–1 in conjunction with their helicopter operations. Three single-engine, two-man aircraft,

*The development of helicopter tactics and techniques in Vietnam will be covered in detail in a separate monograph being prepared for publication by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps.

Vietnamese infantrymen disembark from HMM-362 helicopters and move toward treeline in one of the first helicopter assault operations attempted by a Marine unit in the Mekong Delta. (Photo courtesy of Lieutenant Colonel James P. Kizer, USMC).

a detachment from Marine Observation Squadron 2 (VMO–2), proved remarkably versatile in day-to-day operations over the delta. Primarily, they were used in daylight visual reconnaissance, usually to study objective areas and the approach routes which the helicopters would later use. Sometimes their crews were called upon to photograph proposed landing zones for briefing purposes. Often the aircraft's radios were used to relay messages between various ARVN ground units which were operating beyond the range of their radios. Equipped with two frequency-modulated (FM) radios for work with ground stations and one ultra high-frequency (UHF) radio for communicating with other aircraft, the OE–1 was perfectly suited for controlling helicopter landings. The Marine aviators also found that, unlike their helicopters, the observation aircraft did not arouse suspicion in the area over which it flew. This advantage was due probably to several factors. First, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) routinely operated similar aircraft over the entire region; secondly, the enemy could not readily determine whether the OE–1 was on a reconnaissance mission or merely flying from one point to another; and finally, the small aircraft made little noise. Given these characteristics it was no accident that the helicopter squadron relied on the observation aircraft more and more as the pattern of operations unfolded.

Shortly after their arrival in Vietnam, the Marines of HMM–362 began experimenting with one of the more imaginative techniques developed in the early stages of the intensified U.S.–GVN counterinsurgency effort. Marine air crews had noticed that the enemy often managed to elude the

larger ARVN units by fleeing the operations area in small groups. Even the smallest breach between ARVN units seemed to allow large numbers of guerrillas to escape into covered or heavily populated areas where they became impossible to find. Colonel Carey and Lieutenant Colonel Clapp devised a plan to prevent escapes of this nature. Their idea was to have a flight of four Marine helicopters loaded with about 50 ARVN soldiers circle above the contested area. This so-called "Eagle Flight" would be on the alert for any Viet Cong attempting to evade the ground forces. Once the enemy was located, often by the OE–1 observation aircraft, the helicopters would land the Vietnamese soldiers at a position where they could block his escape. The Marine commanders felt that the adoption of such a tactic would increase the effectiveness of the ARVN's helicopter assault operations.

After several weeks of planning by HMM–362 and the affected III Corps commands, the concept was put into practice. The Eagle Flight was first tested in a large operation on 18 June when HMM–362 helilifted ARVN troops into 16 different landing zones. Heavy monsoon rains made the enemy particularly difficult to pin down, but the Marine pilots managed to sight 10 Viet Cong near the main landing zone. After landing near the enemy, the ARVN troops captured 10 Communist soldiers and wounded one other. Shortly after this incident another Eagle Flight made two eventful contacts with the enemy. The Marine helicopters landed their small force and the ARVN promptly killed four Viet Cong and captured another. Twenty minutes later, after reboarding the helicopters, the South Vietnamese swept down upon a new prey, this time capturing four prisoners.

The novel concept was employed successfully again on 10 July. While HMM–362 aircraft lifted 968 ARVN troops into the Ca Mau area, an Eagle Flight spotted a sampan moving northward from the operations area. The flight leader landed the troops nearby and the ARVN intercepted the craft. Later that day the Marines and ARVN of the Eagle Flight clashed twice with an estimated platoon of Viet Cong. In the first encounter seven enemy were killed and several weapons were captured. In the second skirmish, the enemy suffered six dead and lost more weapons. All four Marine helicopters, however, were hit by small arms fire during the two brief fights.

By the middle of July, the Eagle Flight had become a proven combat tactic. By reducing the enemy's opportunity to escape when the government forces possessed the advantage on the battlefield, it had favorably influenced the tactical situation when used in the Mekong Delta. Equally important, SHUFLY's commanders had demonstrated their ability to adapt their technological resources to the Viet Cong's methods of operations. Variants of the Eagle Flight tactic, under different names such as Tiger Flight, Sparrow Hawk, Pacifier, and Quick Reaction Force, would be used by the Marines throughout the Vietnam war.

The Marines were quick to apply their technological knowhow to other problems which were to confront them during their early operations in the III Corps Tactical Zone. One example was their adaptation of the TAFDS to the problem which arose when the helicopters where called upon to operate far beyond their normal fuel range. HMM–362 helicopters would airlift a TAFDS unit, complete with a 10,000 gallon fuel bladder, pumps, and MABS–16 personnel, to the site where the ARVN troops were to be loaded. The fuel bladders were filled by gasoline trucks which travelled from the nearest source of fuel. The Marine helicopters could then use the TAFDS as a temporary base of operations, refueling between troop pick-ups when necessary. Thus employed, the TAFDS allowed the operating radius of the helicopters to be extended to support even the most distant South Vietnamese operation.

While the Marines were learning to adapt their technology to the guerrilla war environment, the enemy was applying his ingenuity in attempts to frustrate the American and South Vietnamese helicopter operations. The Viet Cong quickly learned to capitalize on the presence of large crowds of civilians who sometimes gathered near helicopter landing zones to watch the strange aircraft. One such incident occurred in June when Communist soldiers mingled with a crowd and delivered fire on helicopters which were lifting elements of the 21st ARVN Division. Two aircraft were hit by enemy fire although the damage was not extensive enough to force them to land. The Marines, who refused to return fire with their individual weapons unless the Viet Cong could be

separated from the civilian populace, found no effective method of countering this tactic. Later in June, the Marines of HMM–362 encountered another tactic when they found that hundreds of upright bamboo stakes had been prepositioned in the intended landing zone. The perpendicular spikes, each four or five feet high, not only prevented the helicopters from landing but also made it impossible to disembark the ARVN troops while hovering. Fortunately, the abundance of landing zones in the delta region tended to make this particular tactic ineffective.*

On 20 July, HMM–362 added a new dimension to the counterguerrilla capabilities of the South Vietnamese forces when it executed the first night helicopter assault of the war. The mission, which began at 0415 at Soc Trang, involved lifting three waves of ARVN troops into an objective on the Plain of Reeds, about 40 miles southwest of Ben Tre. The ARVN force intended to encircle a suspected Viet Cong village before dawn and then attack it at daybreak. The Marine portion of the airlift was completed 10 minutes before daylight after which the Army's 57th Helicopter Company joined the operation. Although the night troop lift was executed without incident, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp attributed its success at least partially to the near perfect conditions. The moonlight, reflected from the flat, flooded rice paddies, had aided the Marine pilots in the tricky operation.[19]

Prior to SHUFLY's deployment to Soc Trang, General Roberts' staff at FMFPac had developed a policy for the periodic rotation of the task unit's Marines for which the Commandant's approval had been gained. The helicopter squadron would be replaced by a similar unit after approximately four months of operations in the combat zone. But rather than being drawn from the 1st MAW on Okinawa, the replacement squadron was to be provided by the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing in California. Officers and men serving with the supporting headquarters and MABS–16 elements, however, were to be replaced by Marines from MAG–16 at approximately four-month intervals. So as not to disrupt the operational efficiency of the task unit, individual replacements would be made in increments.

In accordance with this rotation policy, HMM–163, the HUS unit scheduled to relieve HMM–362, began arriving at Soc Trang on 23 July. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Rathbun, a veteran fighter pilot of World War II and Korea, the squadron continued to arrive during the last week of July. Airlifted by GV–1s from the Marine Corps Air Facility, Santa Ana, California, the new squadron brought neither helicopters nor maintenance equipment. The squadron commander had orders to continue operations with HMM–362's aircraft and equipment.

Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's squadron maintained a steady operational pace even after the new unit's appearance. On 27 July, 18 of HMM–362's helicopters participated in an operation about 30 miles northeast of Soc Trang. The next day the task unit commander committed 21 helicopters and OE–1s to a 21st ARVN Division operation near Ca Mau. The Eagle Flight was committed on four different occasions during this operation.

Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's "Ridge Runners" officially relieved "Archie's Angels" on 1 August after a week of orientation flying with HMM–362's crews. The men of the departing squadron could reflect on their tour in South Vietnam with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Since their arrival in mid-April, they had executed 50 combat helicopter assaults, had flown 4,439 sorties, and had amassed 5,262 hours of combat flight time, all in unarmed aircraft. During the course of these missions they had made approximately 130 different landings against Viet Cong opposition. Seventeen of their 24 helicopters and two of the three OE–1 aircraft had received battle damage. To the credit of the squadron's maintenance personnel and aircrews, HMM–362 had not lost a single aircraft during its operations in the Republic of Vietnam. Miraculously the squadron had suffered no casualties while testing the Marine Corps' vertical envelopment concept in the guerrilla war situation.[20]

During their three and a half months at Soc Trang, Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's men had contributed significantly to another facet of the war effort—one usually considered unrelated to normal combat operations. Sensing the unique links between the political and military aspects of the struggle in South Vietnam, Colonel Carey had

*The German army had used a similar technique (upright poles) to obstruct landing zones against U.S. paratroops at Normandy during World War II. (Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 80.)

initiated a "People-to-People-Program," the objective of which was to assist the Government of Vietnam in winning the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. Within a few days after occupying the Soc Trang airfield, Colonel Carey had ordered the task unit's medical facilities made available to Vietnamese civilians requiring emergency medical treatment. U.S. Navy doctors and corpsmen began visiting nearby villages to hold "sick call" for the local inhabitants. On an average visit these medical teams would examine around 60 Vietnamese of all ages. They would then dispense soap, vitamins, and aspirin—commodities which some rural Vietnamese had never seen. Gradually, the medical teams expanded their operations until by mid-June they were being flown by helicopter as far away as Ca Mau.

HMM–362's departure from Vietnam coincided roughly with the departure of most of the Marine task unit's senior officers—the men who had directed the efforts to win the "other war" for the allegiance of the Vietnamese people. On 30 July, Colonel Julius W. Ireland, another Marine aviator who had seen combat in two previous wars, relieved Colonel Carey as the task unit commander. The new commander was one of few Marines who had been in Vietnam previously. In April 1954 he had landed at Da Nang (then known by its French name, Tourane) as squadron commander of Marine Attack Squadron 324 (VMA–324) and delivered 25 F4U/FG Corsair fighter bombers to the French who were in desperate need of attack aircraft to support Dien Bien Phu. Five days after Ireland assumed command of Task Unit 79.3.5, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph R. Davis replaced Lieutenant Colonel Eldridge as commanding officer of the MABS–16 sub unit. On 13 August another change occurred when the executive officer of the Marine task unit, Lieutenant Colonel Harry C. Dees, was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Alton W. McCully. Except that it left few original members of the task unit, the departure of these Marines for new duty stations in Okinawa, Japan, and the United States did not affect the operations at Soc Trang. Thoroughly briefed on their responsibilities, the new officers would continue to direct Marine support of the Vietnamese government on both the battlefield and the psychological front.

HMM–163 participated in its first combat mission as a squadron on 1 August when it joined the Army's 57th Helicopter Company in a coordinated troop lift. Like their predecessors, "Rathbun's Ridge Runners" maintained a brisk pace of operations during the weeks following their initial assignment. Shortly after its first troop lift, the squadron participated in a 2,000-man South Vietnamese spoiling operation in An Xuyen, South Vietnam's southernmost province. Anticipating a major Viet Cong offensive in the four southern provinces, III Corps authorities moved their headquarters to Soc Trang and established a forward command post at Ca Mau. The Vietnamese Air Force then positioned a composite detachment of four AD–6 Skyraiders (single-engine, propeller-driven attack bombers built by Douglas), two T–28s, and a number of H–34 helicopters (the U.S. Army, Air Force, and VNAF version of the HUS) at Soc Trang to support the operation. Joined by the VNAF H–34s, the Marine squadron conducted numerous troop lifts during the week-long operation. At the end of the action the ARVN reported 84 Viet Cong killed, another 30 captured, and the confiscation of nearly 15,000 pounds of arms, ammunition, and explosives. The first Marine helicopter loss in Vietnam occurred during the operation when a VNAF fighter careened off the runway and damaged a parked HUS to the extent that it could not be repaired. Marine mechanics stripped undamaged parts from the helicopter for use as replacements.*

HMM–163 suffered its first aircraft damage as a result of combat a few day's later on 18 August during a mission led by Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun. Fourteen HUSs arrived at a prearranged pick-up point to rendezvous with an ARVN infantry force but the Marine pilots discovered that the unit had not appeared. One crewman then reported having seen some ARVN troops about a half mile away from the landing zone. At this juncture, a white smoke signal appeared at approximately the same location that the Marine had observed the South Vietnamese troops. Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun and his wingmate, assuming that the smoke marked the actual pick-up point, took off to investigate the area. While making a low pass over

*Marine helicopters lost in Vietnam during the 1962–1964 period were replaced by new ones airlifted from Okinawa by U.S. Air Force C–124 Globemaster transports. By replacing aircraft losses on a one-to-one basis the task unit was able to maintain a level of 24 helicopters except for brief periods.

Marine officers visit Father Phuoc's village. Left to right: Lieutenant Colonel Archie J. Clapp; Colonel John F. Carey; Father Phuoc; Colonel Julius W. Ireland; Colonel Gordon Gale; Major General Richard G. Weede; French Interpreter Gilles H. Rocheleau; and three unidentified Marine officers. (USMC Photo A420824).

the smoke signal, the squadron commander's helicopter was hit several times by small arms fire which severed the rudder control cable and punctured the main rotor transmission. The loss of oil required Rathbun to make a forced landing on a nearby road. After mechanics had been flown in and repairs had been accomplished, the helicopter was flown to a secure area.

An investigation of the incident later revealed that the confusion had begun when the ARVN unit scheduled to be helilifted became involved in a skirmish with guerrillas less than a mile from the pick up point. A VNAF Forward Air Controller (FAC) in an observation aircraft had then marked the Viet Cong position for an air strike with a white smoke grenade rather than red smoke, as was normally used. This was the smoke which Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun had attempted to identify when his aircraft was hit.

From this incident the pilots of HMM-163 learned several valuable lessons about helicopter support in conjunction with ARVN ground operations. First, helilifts of government forces from the field at prearranged times required thorough last minute coordination. Secondly, helicopters could not be used safely on low-level reconnaissance or identification passes. Finally, prearranged colored smoke signals were easily confused and when used routinely were subject to enemy attempts at deception. Such signalling methods were most effective when used in conjunction with radio communications between air and ground units.

A somewhat humorous sequel to this incident

took place later in the day when Rathbun learned that he had been selected for promotion to colonel. The timing of the notification prompted one squadron wit to quip: "Lost a bird, gained a bird." [21]

"Rathbun's Ridge Runners" continued intensive support operations in III Corps Tactical Zone throughout the month of August. Their daily missions normally included both scheduled troop lifts and unscheduled medical evacuations. During the week of 19–25 August HMM–163 helicopters logged slightly over 800 combat flying hours. A squadron record for a single day was established on 24 August when 197.6 helicopter hours were flown. Flight time for the helicopters during the entire month totalled 2,543 hours—a new Marine Corps record for an HUS squadron. The OE–1 aircraft added 63 missions and 212 hours to this total. Another statistic revealed that 21 of the squadron's pilots logged over 100 hours of combat flying time during August.[22] This record was even more impressive considering that flight operations were hampered by the monsoon season which reached its peak during August in the Mekong Delta.

In August Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's men made a significant modification to their helicopters when they began mounting M–60 machine guns inside the cargo hatch. So as not to obstruct the hatch during loading and unloading phases, the squadron's metalsmiths designed a flexible mount which allowed the crew chiefs to swing the belt-fed, 7.62mm automatic weapon back into the cabin when necessary. The addition of the machine gun enabled the crew chief to protect the otherwise defenseless helicopter during critical landing and take off phases. Still, the Marine gunners were restricted in their action by MACV's "rules of engagement" which at this time stipulated that American servicemen could fire only after being fired upon and then only at clearly identified enemy. Intended to prevent offensive combat action by U.S. military personnel operating in Vietnam, these regulations prevented Americans from returning fire except when the enemy was clearly identified.* Primarily because of these restrictions the Marines seldom employed their M–60s in the heavily populated Mekong Delta.

*The rules of engagement applied to U.S. advisors as well as aviation crews. Although they underwent several modifications during the course of the war, the above definition was virtually unaltered during the period between 1962 and 1964.

Preparations and Redeployment

In early September General Harkins directed that Colonel Ireland begin planning for the redeployment of his helicopter task unit northward to Da Nang. The shift to I Corps, which had been the subject of much debate prior to SHUFLY's assignment at Soc Trang, came as no surprise. Shortly after the task unit's arrival in the Mekong Delta, Colonel Carey accompanied General Condon on a visit to the Army's 93d Helicopter Company at Da Nang. There they discussed details of the relocation with Army officers. In early July General Harkins set 1 August as the date on which the Marine task unit and the 93d Helicopter Company would switch locations. But personal appeals by General Nghiem, the III Corps commander and his senior U.S. advisor, Colonel Porter, that the Marine helicopters be retained at Soc Trang caused Harkins to postpone the date for the exchange until 15 September.

In that the airlift was executed in phases, the Marines' movement to Da Nang was accomplished in much the same manner as had been the task unit's initial move into Soc Trang. On 4 September Colonel Ireland dispatched the task unit's assistant communications officer and an advance party to Da Nang to assess the communications requirements there and to prepare for the arrival of the remainder of the Marines and their equipment. Four days later Marine wiremen, message center personnel, and radio operators began preparing a communications center at their new home. The next day the advance party established radio contact with SHUFLY headquarters in order to help coordinate the move. By 9 September MABS–16 technicians had assembled a TAFDS at the Da Nang airfield. This facility would enable the GV–1 transports participating in the airlift to refuel for the 460-mile return flight to Soc Trang after unloading their cargoes at Da Nang.

While the advance party readied the facilities at Da Nang for its unit's arrival, combat support operations and preparations for the move northward continued simultaneously at Soc Trang. During an operation on 5 September, three of HMM–163's helicopters were hit by several rounds of enemy small arms fire. Although all three aircraft returned safely to base, the Marines suffered their first casualty to Viet Cong fire when Corporal

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Billy S. Watson, a crew chief, was slightly wounded. Troop lifts from Soc Trang continued until 1740 on 13 September when helicopter support operations were ended and the final preparations for the move to Da Nang began.

On the evening of 14 September, the first of the Marine GV–1s slated to transport the task unit arrived at Soc Trang from Okinawa. At dawn the next morning, the refueler-transports began shuttling Marines and their equipment to Da Nang and the Army's 93d Helicopter Company to Soc Trang. By the end of the day much of the airlift had been completed. The crews and helicopters of Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's squadron, however, did not begin displacing northward until the 16th when 12 HUSs made the seven-hour flight to Da Nang with three en route refueling stops. The 12 remaining helicopters arrived at SHUFLY's new base of operations the next day. The move was completed on 20 September when the last cargo carrying GV–1 landed at Da Nang.

Accomplishments

As SHUFLY's Marines began preparing for their impending operations in the northern provinces they could look with pride on their accomplishments at Soc Trang. Since their arrival in the Mekong Delta in April the Leathernecks had clearly demonstrated their ability to conduct sustained and effective helicopter operations in support of non-English-speaking ground forces. While it could not be said that their presence had completely transformed the complexion of the GVN's struggle to control the critical Mekong Delta region, the Marine helicopters had provided the ARVN units operating there with a degree of mobility they had not previously possessed. This new-found mobility in turn had helped generate a new offensive spirit within government units assigned to southern III Corps. In his letter to ComUSMACV requesting the retention of the task unit at Soc Trang, Colonel Porter, the Senior U.S. Advisor to the corps tactical zone, reported: "Now they [ARVN forces] have a taste of victory and for the first time are beginning to believe there is a possibility of defeating the Viet Cong." [23]

During the course of their operations throughout South Vietnam's southern provinces, the SHUFLY Marines displayed an instinct for recognizing and coping with the challenges of unconventional warfare. Confronted by a war without front lines in which an elusive, highly mobile enemy blended readily with the local populace, the task unit's leaders devised new and successful helicopter tactics. Likewise, SHUFLY's Marine and Navy personnel moved to prevent a possible conflict of cultures and to discredit Communist propaganda through the initiation of the People-to-People Program. Although only an informal beginning, this program would serve as a foundation upon which the U.S. Marine Corps would later build a doctrine defining the relationship between Marines on duty in Vietnam and the Vietnamese people.

Beyond the innovative thinking of its leaders, much of SHUFLY's success in III Corps was produced by hard work on a sustained basis. For this the individual Marines, particularly the maintenance crews which often worked around the clock in primitive surroundings to keep the helicopters airworthy, deserved heavy credit. Although unglamorous, their daily contributions underwrote the success of the combat support operations. So, functioning as a team, the task unit's members blended innovation, hard work, and technical expertise with perseverance and courage to carve out a reputation for themselves in the far-away rice lands of the Mekong Delta.

CHAPTER 6

SHUFLY Moves North

Arrival at Da Nang—I Corps Tactical Zone—Military Situation, September 1962—Initial Helicopter Operations—Marine People-to-People Program—SHUFLY Operations in I Corps

Arrival at Da Nang

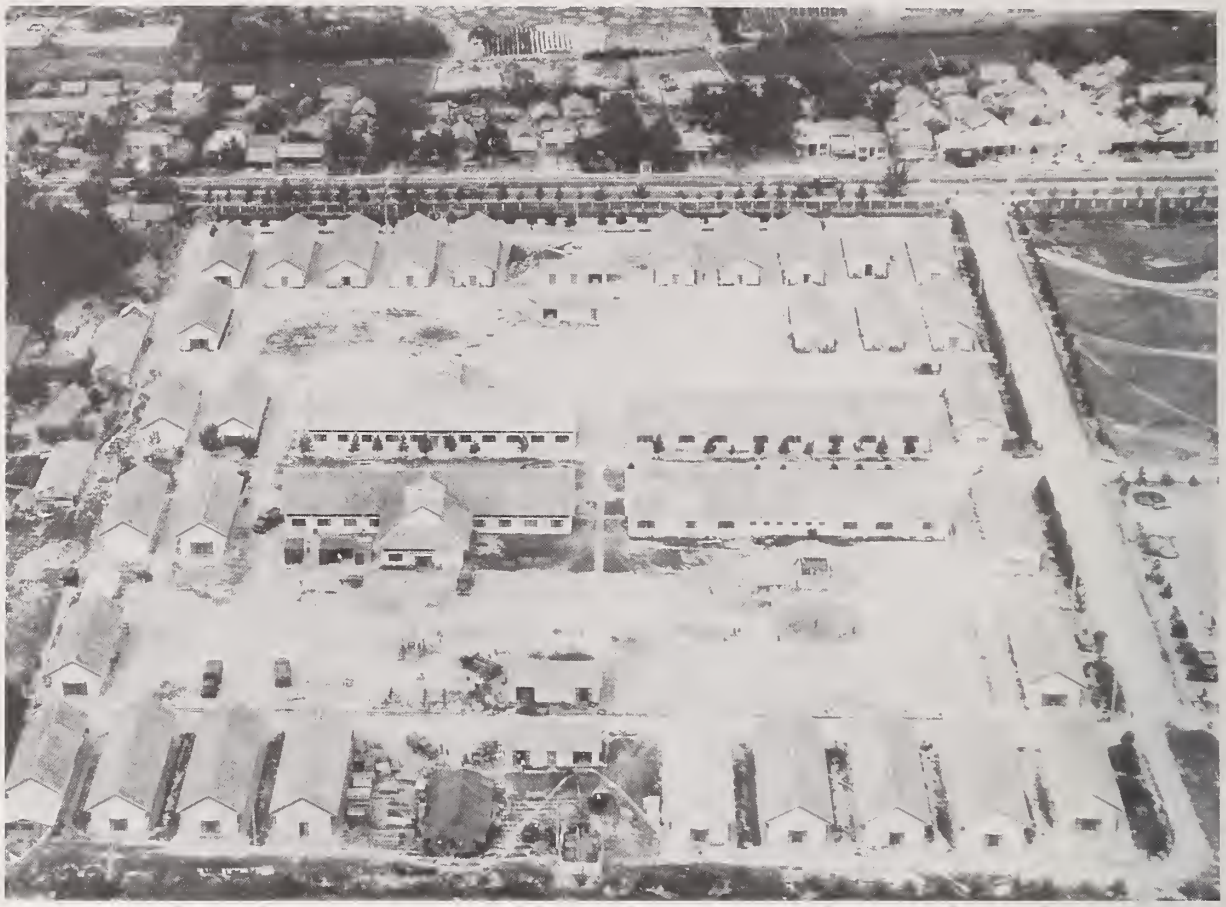
Da Nang retained many characteristics of an old French colonial port city when the Marines arrived there in mid-September 1962. With its thriving market place, its throngs of bicycles, and a noticeable dearth of automobile traffic, the city was certainly more Asian than European in appearance. Still, the former French presence was evident in the architecture of public buildings, electric and telephone lines, paved streets, built-up waterfront, and an airfield. Although the French influence seemed not to have disturbed the traditional Vietnamese culture, it had imparted a picturesque charm to South Vietnam's second largest city.

Virtually surrounded by the city itself, Da Nang's airfield was to serve as SHUFLY's new base of operations. Having been rebuilt as a military base by the French following World War II, the Da Nang facility was relatively modern. Understandably, it differed in many ways from the crude little airfield the Marines had left behind in the steamy Mekong Delta. The runway, for example, was considerably longer, having 8,000 feet of paved surface. The Da Nang base was also busier, having already been occupied by Vietnamese and U.S. Air Force units. Furthermore, it served the city as a commercial airport.

Scattered around the long north-south runway were numerous clusters of French-built masonry structures. A group of 50 of these yellow-walled buildings, located about one half mile west of the runway, had been designated as living quarters for the newly arrived Marines. Although the actual living spaces were somewhat crowded and in need of much repair, the indoor toilets, showers, ceiling fans, and fluorescent lights (none of which functioned properly) were welcomed by the men who had experienced the discomforts of life in Soc Trang's "tent city." Once the Marines had moved in, their compound would include a chapel, medical and dental facilities, service clubs, a movie, a barber shop, a laundry, and a mess hall.

While many of the problems encountered initially by the Marines at Da Nang were similar to those that had greeted their predecessors at Soc Trang, there were also some new ones to be resolved. The two most imposing of these stemmed from the distance between the living compound and working areas. Located along the southeast side of the airstrip, the flight line and hangar were nearly three miles from the Marine quarters by road. Located still farther away, about a quarter mile south of the hangar, were the motor pool and communications facility. In addition to creating a new requirement for transportation, the distances between the various areas necessitated adjustments in the security arrangements which had been used at Soc Trang.

Fortunately SHUFLY's first commander, Colonel Carey, had foreseen the requirement for transportation between the living area and the flight line during his visit to the Da Nang installation in April. The problem was solved by the purchase of three used American school buses which were already on hand when the Marines arrived from Soc Trang. The security situation proved somewhat more perplexing. Initally Colonel Ireland handled the problem in much the same manner as it had been at Soc Trang. A permanent sergeant-of-the-guard was detailed to supervise a security force composed of men from the MABS-16 sub unit and HMM-163. Guard posts were established around the helicopter flight line, the hangar, the TAFDS, the motor pool-communications area, and the billeting compound. But this arrangement, while



A portion of the Marine Compound at Da Nang. (Official USMC Photo).

serving the intended purpose, was not ideal. Frequently the Marines who served on security watch at night were called upon to perform long hours of work the following day. This prompted Colonel Ireland to request that a permanent security force be assigned to his command in order that the overworked mechanics, cooks, carpenters, electricians, and communicators could concentrate on their particular jobs. The request was placed under consideration by ComUSMACV and FMFPac authorities but was not approved immediately.*

At Da Nang Colonel Ireland's task unit was not responsible for every facet of airfield operations as had been the case previously at Soc Trang. The U.S. Air Force provided radar, ground control approach, tactical air naviation, and meteorological services at the new installation while the Vietnamese operated the control tower. These conveniences allowed Ireland to make a small reduction in the overall size of the Marine task unit. Those MABS-16 specialists who had operated these systems at Soc Trang were returned to their parent organizations on Okinawa.

I Corps Tactical Zone

At the time the Marine task unit arrived in Da Nang, I Corps Tactical Zone encompassed South Vietnam's five northern provinces. Quang Tri Province, located immediately south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) topped this tier of political subdivisions. Below Quang Tri Province lay Thua Thien, followed by Quang Nam, Quang Tin

*General Weede explained that, because such increases could not be made without the approval of the Department of Defense, such requests were forwarded first to MACV Headquarters for approval. (*Weede Interview.*)

I CORPS 1962
MILES
0 10 25 50
0 10 25 50 75
KILOMETERS
NORTH VIETNAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
DONG HA
QUANG TRI
QUANG TRI
HUE
THUA THIEN
DA NANG
HOI AN
QUANG NAM
AN HOA
LAOS
TAM KY
QUANG TIN
QUANG NGAI
BA TO
KONTUM
BINH DINH
CAMBODIA

(recently created), and Quang Ngai Provinces. All are coastal provinces and, with the exception of Quang Ngai, extend inland from the seacoast to the Laotian border, a distance which varies between 30 and 70 miles. Together, they occupy the central portion of the region formerly known as Annam and extend 225 miles to the south of the DMZ.

The climatic pattern in the northern provinces is the exact reverse of that which affects the southern portion of the nation. In I Corps the dry season occurs in the summer months while the monsoons, which blow from the northeast, dominate the winter. Heavy monsoon rains accompanied by wind and fog normally begin in October. After reaching their peak usually in November, the monsoon rains tend to diminish gradually until their disappearance around mid-March.

The differences between the physical structure of the northern provinces and the Mekong Delta is even more striking than their reversed climatic patterns. White beaches stretch almost unbroken along the entire length of I Corps. Just inland and roughly parallel to the coast south of Da Nang lies a lightly populated strip of sand dunes and generally unproductive soil. This strip varies in width from one half to two miles. In the west it dissolves into the flat, densely populated coastal plain. Any similarity between the Mekong Delta and the northern provinces is found in this expanse of fertile rice-producing land where tiny rural hamlets and slightly larger villages, each enclosed by thick hedgerows and treelines, abound. North of Da Nang the semi-barren coastal sands tend to extend farther inland, and thereby reduce the productive portion of the coastal plains.

The most distinct geographic feature of I Corps, and one easily visible to the Marines at Da Nang, is the chain of towering mountains which protrude from the flat coastal plain several miles west of the city. There is a conspicuous absence of foothills leading to the mountains which seem to surround Da Nang on the north and west. North of the Hai Van Peninsula, a rugged promonotory which juts into the South China Sea about 10 miles north of the Marines' new home, a zone of foothills eases the transition from the wide coastal plain to the rugged jungle-covered mountains.

The coastal plains of the five northern provinces are broken by several significant streams along which most of the region's principal population centers are located. Roughly 10 miles south of the 1954 partition line the Cua Viet empties into the southern portion of the Tonkin Gulf. Both Quang Tri City, the capital of Quang Tri Province, and Dong Ha, South Vietnam's northernmost population center of any significance, are situated on the Cua Viet and its major tributary, the Song Cam Lo. The Song Huong (often referred to as the Perfume River), which flows past the old imperial capital of Hue, enters the sea at a point approximately half way between Da Nang and the nation's northern boundary.* At Da Nang the Song Han (also called the Da Nang River) flows into Da Nang Harbor after its main tributary, the Song Cau Do, curves through the coastal plains immediately south and west of the city. Eighteen miles south of the Marines' new base of operations, the Song Cau Dai empties into the South China Sea near Hoi An, the capital of Quang Nam Province. The Song Cau Dai originates about 18 miles inland at the confluence of the Song Thu Bon and the Song Vu Gia which twist seaward from the south and west respectively. Together these three estuaries constitute the most important geographic feature of the sprawling coastal plain south of Da Nang. Another major stream, the Song Tra Bong, flows on an eastward course about 32 miles south of the Song Cau Dai. Still further south is the Song Tra Khuc, a river which dominates the wide coastal plain of Quang Ngai Province in much the same fashion as does the Song Cau Dai and its tributaries in the area south of Da Nang. The provincial capital, Quang Ngai, once a major railroad center for South Vietnam, is situated several miles inland on the south bank of the Song Tra Khuc. The southernmost stream of any significance in I Corps is the Song Ve, which angles northeastward through central Quang Ngai Province. While none of these waterways is navigable far beyond its mouth by ocean-going vessels, each serves the local population as convenient local routes of communication as well as vital sources of irrigation water during the long dry seasons.

The two and a half million people who inhabited I Corps in 1962 had developed along social and economic lines dictated largely by the geography and climate of their region. Rice growing, centered

*In the Vietnamese language the word "song" means stream and normally precedes the name of rivers.

Aerial view of Marine helicopter flight line at Da Nang shortly after SHUFLY's relocation to I Corps in September 1962. (Official USMC Photo).

on the coastal plains, dominated the economic activities of the area. Combined, the provinces of I Corps produced nearly half a million tons of rice annually. Fishing, concentrated along the coast and the major rivers, ranked as the second most important economic pursuit. Unlike most of South Vietnam, I Corps did possess some potential for industrial development. A small but productive surface coal mine was located about 25 miles southwest of Da Nang at Nong Son along the western bank of the Song Thu Bon. Although the mine was operating in 1962, it had made little discernable impact on the overall economic picture of the region.

Military Situation, September 1962

From its new base at Da Nang, Colonel Ireland's task unit was responsible for directly supporting the forces under Major General Tran Van Don's I Corps headquarters. The 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions, headquartered respectively at Hue and Da Nang, were the major tactical units at General Don's disposal. Occasionally elements of the 25th ARVN Division, headquartered at Kontum in northwestern II Corps, joined I Corps forces for offensive operations along the southern fringe of Quang Ngai Province. Several ARVN Ranger battalions served as mobile reaction forces for the corps tactical zone.* Also scattered over the northern corps tactical zone were numerous paramilitary units of assorted sizes. These, too, were garrisoned primarily along the heavily populated coastal plain.

*The ranger battalions had been organized in late 1960 from existing ARVN forces. They were conceived as highly mobile infantry units and were under the direct control of the CTZ commander.

Opposing these government forces in the early fall of 1962 were Viet Cong forces of formidable strength. Four interprovincial battalions (main force), four interprovincial companies, five provincial companies, 18 district companies, and three district platoons were known to be operating within the boundaries of I Corps. Together, these units totalled an estimated 4,750 men.[1] Added to the presence of these known Viet Cong units was the threat posed to I Corps by its proximity to North Vietnam and to the so-called "Ho Chi Minh Trails" located across the Laotian border. The relative position of the northern provinces naturally invited Communist infiltration. In June, for example, the *4th Viet Cong Battalion*, a main force unit, was infiltrated into Quang Nam Province from sanctuaries in Laos. By September MACV intelligence estimates reported one North Vietnamese (PAVN) infantry division, two independent PAVN infantry regiments, and an artillery regiment poised in areas of Laos adjacent to the I Corps border. "These units," the U.S. report warned, ". . . could be committed anywhere in I Corps or [the] northern part of II Corps 20 days after starting movement." [2]

While the government's nationwide strategy focused on clearing and holding the populated areas, the physiographic configuration of I Corps (as well as II Corps to the south) demanded that offensive operations be conducted in the mountains adjacent to the coastal plains against Viet Cong base areas. Since the arrival of the U.S. Army helicopter company at Da Nang early in the year, General Don had shown an increasing tendency to mount battalion and regimental heliborne assaults deep into the western mountains. Capitalizing on the mobility which the American helicopters afforded, the ARVN command had hoped to disrupt remote Communist base areas inside the international border. Still, heliborne offensives into western I Corps were often hampered by bad weather, particularly during the monsoon season.

Another facet of the government effort to deny the enemy unrestricted access to the mountains was a system characterized by a network of small, relatively isolated outposts. In late 1961, at the urging of U.S. officials in Saigon, the Diem government had launched a program whose ultimate objective was similar to that of the Strategic Hamlet Program. First, U.S. Army Special Forces teams entered remote Montagnard villages located in the Annamite Chain and built small fortified camps. This accomplished, the Americans initiated pacification activities with the hope of securing the allegiance of the traditionally independent Montagnard tribesmen.

By mid-1962 the Special Forces effort appeared on its way to success. Already Montagnard tribesmen had been organized into a number of Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs) throughout the mountains of I and II Corps. Advised by Special Forces teams, the CIDG units were monitoring infiltration routes and harassing the Communists as they attempted to move through the mountains. By the summer of 1962 the distinctive little barbed wire enclosed camps were scattered over the length of western I Corps.

Although it played an important role in the government's strategy for controlling the insurgency in the northern provinces, the outpost system had obvious shortcomings. Roads between the distant camps and the towns along the coastal plain were almost nonexistent. Those that did exist, such as Route 9, the road which extended from Route 1 westward across Quang Tri Province and into Laos, were vulnerable to ambush or interdiction by guerrilla forces. Truck convoys, furthermore, consumed time and required protection by security forces. As a result of their relative isolation, the CIDG camps had come to depend heavily on aircraft as a means of resupply. While crude runways had been constructed at many of the outposts, they were often better suited for helicopter operations than for fixed-wing transport landings. The newly arrived Marine commanders anticipated that their squadron, like the Army helicopter company it had replaced, would be required to devote a sizable percentage of sorties to resupplying the far-flung outposts.

Initial Helicopter Operations

The system of helicopter coordination in I Corps promised to be somewhat different from that which had governed Marine operations in the Mekong Delta. At Da Nang, an Air Support Operations Center (ASOC) was organized within the corps headquarters to process all requests for aviation support. Manned by ARVN, VNAF, U.S.

MAJOR OUTPOSTS I CORPS 1962
PROVINCIAL CAPITALS
GOVERNMENT OUTPOSTS
MILES
0 10 25 50
0 10 25 50 75
KILOMETERS
NORTH VIETNAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
QUANG TRI
QUANG TRI
KHE SANH
HUE
THUA THIEN
A LOUI
TA BAT
A SHAU
NAM DONG
DA NANG
AN DIEM
THUONG DUC
HOI AN
QUANG NAM
BEN GIANG
HEP DUC
LAOS
TIEN PHUOC
TAM KY
QUANG TIN
TRA BONG
HA THANH
QUANG NGAI
GI LANG
BA TO
KONTUM
BINH DINH
CAMBODIA

Air Force, and U.S. Marine officers, the ASOC processed mission requests from the various field commands, passing them on to the Joint Operations Center at JGS headquarters for final approval. Once approved, the ASOC assigned specific missions to the American and Vietnamese units which supported I CTZ. This arrangement enabled the corps headquarters to plan and coordinate all combat support missions flown within the five northern provinces.

The Vietnamese commanders in I Corps, who had learned to value helicopter support as a result of the Army aviation company's eight-month presence at Da Nang, lost no time in employing the newly arrived Marine squadron. HMM–163 flew its first combat operation from Da Nang on 18 September, the day after the last flight of helicopters arrived from Soc Trang. Fourteen HUSs lifted troops of the 2d ARVN Division into two landing zones in the rugged hills about 35 miles south of Da Nang and 25 miles inland from the coast. The scarcity of suitable landing zones in the steep hill country and the fact that the enemy could deliver fire on those that did exist from nearby high ground and the surrounding jungle prompted the Marine pilots to adjust their tactics in preparation for this mission. After VNAF fighters bombed and strafed the objective area, the helicopters made an unopposed landing.

The tactic of preparing helicopter landing zones with air strikes was continued and refined in the ensuing weeks. The Marines began using artillery fire in conjunction with air strikes to neutralize enemy troops in the vicinity of the objective. The OE–1 was well suited for assisting in the employment of the artillery fire support. Having familiarized themselves with the landing site during a prior reconnaissance mission, the pilot and observer of the OE–1 would arrive over the designated area prior to the operation and adjust artillery fire until the helicopters appeared. During the landing the crew of the observation aircraft often coordinated between the helicopters and the escorting aircraft and were available to assist the ground units with artillery fire missions.

The task unit's staff borrowed another idea from their experience in the Mekong Delta which allowed HMM–163 to provide more efficient helicopter support in the northern provinces. In this case the concept of temporarily positioning the TAFDS to support specific operations was refined somewhat by placing the portable refueling bladders at secure, permanent locations throughout I Corps. Several days after arriving in I Corps, the Marines emplaced a 10,000-gallon section of the TAFDS at Quang Ngai, about 65 miles south of Da Nang, to serve as a permanent refueling point for aircraft operating in southern I Corps. Within the month, another fuel bladder was positioned at Hue and a third was emplaced at Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province, which was situated on Route 1 about half way between Da Nang and Quang Ngai. These well-chosen refueling points greatly enhanced the squadron's operational potential. Used to support daily operations, they enabled the helicopters to operate deep into the adjacent mountain areas on resupply and medical evacuation missions.

On 19 September, the day after their initial combat support assignment in I Corps, the Marine helicopter crews were called upon to conduct an operation which they would repeat often in the coming months. They were ordered to evacuate a threatened government outpost from the mountains 18 miles west of Da Nang. That day the HMM–163 pilots lifted an odd cargo of troops, dependents, personal belongings and an assortment of pigs, cows, chickens, and ducks to a secure area on the coastal plain.

Unfortunately, helicopter evacuations of encircled or endangered South Vietnamese outposts would become almost routine for Marine helicopter squadrons assigned to Vietnam during the period between 1962 and 1965. As the North Vietnamese stepped up their support for the Viet Cong, the isolated government outposts along the infiltration routes became particularly vulnerable. The increased number of helicopter evacuation missions during the next three years would be grim testimony of the trend of warfare which was unfolding in the South. Reinforced with more and more North Vietnamese and growing amounts of Communist bloc and captured U.S. equipment, the Viet Cong would press the initiative even in South Vietnam's most isolated areas.

The Communists operating in I Corps lost little time in challenging the newly arrived Marine unit. HMM–163 suffered its first battle damage while lifting elements of the 2d ARVN Division into a landing zone southwest of Tam Ky on 26 September.

One of 22 helicopters involved in the mission was struck in the fuselage by small arms fire despite the use of preparatory air and artillery strikes on the landing zone. The day after this incident another of the squadron's helicopters was hit by enemy fire while attempting to evacuate wounded ARVN soldiers from the battlefield. On the 29th two more aircraft were damaged by ground fire while participating in another troop lift. One round passed through the windshield and exited at the rear of the cockpit, missing the copilot's head by inches. During the first week of October another HUS was struck while landing at Tien Phuoc, a government outpost about 15 miles southwest of Tam Ky. In this incident two ARVN troops were killed and the Marine crew chief, Lance Corporal James I. Mansfield, was wounded before the pilot could fly the aircraft out of the danger area. In each of the instances the helicopters were able to return to Da Nang where necessary repairs were made.

The most serious incident recorded during the early operations in I Corps ironically resulted from mechanical failure rather than Viet Cong fire. It occurred on 6 October when a search and rescue helicopter crashed and burned on a hillside 15 miles southeast of Tam Ky while covering a 20-plane helilift of 2d ARVN Division elements.* Unable to land near the downed aircraft because of the thick jungle, other helicopters landed troops at the base of the hill with instructions to proceed to the crash site on foot. When the Vietnamese soldiers reached the downed aircraft after cutting their way through dense vegetation, they found the copilot, crew chief, and five other members of the task unit dead. The pilot, First Lieutenant William T. Sinnott, who was injured seriously, was hoisted through the trees and evacuated by an HUS which came to the rescue. The five Marines killed in the crash were First Lieutenant Michael J. Tunney, Sergeant Richard E. Hamilton, Sergeant Jerald W. Pendell, Corporal Thomas E. Anderson, and Lance Corporal Miguel A. Valentin. Two Navy personnel, Lieutenant Gerald Griffin, a doctor, and Hospitalman G. O. Norton were also dead. These were the first deaths suffered by Marine Task Unit 79.5 since deploying to Vietnam.[3]

*For larger operations the task unit commander usually designated one HUS as a search and rescue aircraft. This helicopter normally carried several mechanics and Navy medical personnel and was equipped with a hoist.

An administrative measure which eventually resulted in the extension of the length of tours for the Marine helicopter squadron as well as all other personnel assigned to SHUFLY was initiated in the first week of October. Colonel Ireland dispatched a recommendation to the Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing proposing that the tours for both the squadron and the individual Marines serving with the sub unit and the task unit headquarters be set at six months. Pointing out that the U.S. Army helicopter company which had occupied Da Nang previously had operated from January to September without rotating personnel, the task unit commander outlined the positive features of such an adjustment. It would, he contended, provide more continuity for administration and operations, thereby resulting in a more effective utilization of manpower. To underscore his argument, Ireland emphasized the number of man hours involved in the rotation of a helicopter squadron. Adding his opinion that the two-month extension of all tours would not measurably affect the morale of the Marines at Da Nang, he recommended that the next rotation of helicopter squadrons be postponed until January. After being forwarded to FMFPac for consideration, Colonel Ireland's proposals were approved later in the fall and instructions were passed to all involved commands to implement the new policy.[4]

Another adjustment—this one in the area of tactics—had been made during the task unit's first two months at Da Nang. By November the Eagle Flight concept had been tailored to complement reaction force plans which already existed in I Corps at the time of SHUFLY's relocation. ARVN authorities in the northern corps tactical zone had developed a system whereby their various infantry units were placed on alert for use as heliborne reaction forces. Designated the Tiger Force, the alert unit was staged at its base, ready to react to any tactical emergency.

HMM–163 Marines executed one of their earliest Tiger Flights on 7 November in response to a train ambush sprung by the Viet Cong several miles northwest of the Hai Van Peninsula. Four Marine helicopters launched from Da Nang, made an airborne rendezvous with two other HUSs, and proceeded to Hoa My, four miles away, to pick up a 52-man ARVN Tiger Force. The Marines then helilifted the South Vietnamese into a suitable

landing zone near the ambush site. The relatively short amount of time consumed in the reaction did not prevent the Communist attackers from vanishing into the surrounding jungle. Generally, however, the tactic was more successful, particularly when the reaction force was used to reinforce a threatened static position or to establish hasty blocking positions in support of ground offensive operations that were already underway.

While the task unit encountered few major problems during the early operations from Da Nang, minor difficulties were commonplace. Most often these developed during the execution phase of combat support missions. One that particularly concerned the Marine commanders was the tendency of South Vietnamese units not to prepare properly for scheduled helilifts. To the dismay of the Leatherneck helicopter crews, ARVN activities at the pickup points were usually characterized by confusion. More often than not the Vietnamese unit scheduled to be helilifted had not been organized into heliteams prior to the arrival of the transport aircraft. Given the fact that heliborne operations were still somewhat of a novelty to most ARVN small unit leaders (and to many U.S. advisors) at this stage of the war, these circumstances were perhaps understandable. Nevertheless, lack of prior preparation at pickup points on the part of the ground units often threatened to disrupt the timing of preplanned operations.

To help remedy this situation and to insure that their helicopters were not overloaded, the U.S. Marines began designating one of the squadron's noncommissioned officers as "loadmaster." Equipped with a radio, the loadmaster would arrive at the assembly area on board the first helicopter, whereupon he would disembark and supervise the entire loading process. This technique was particularly valuable during operations in which ARVN units were being helilifted from the field. In such cases the loadmaster performed the same function as did those who supervised the loading process at secure assembly areas. This, of course, required that the Leatherneck remain in the landing zone until the last Vietnamese troops had boarded the final helicopter. Although dangerous, this technique enabled the Marines to eliminate many problems which might otherwise have occurred.

By early November the monsoon season had begun to settle over the northern portions of South Vietnam. Unlike the summer rains in the Mekong Delta in which Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's crews had managed to set new helicopter flight records, the winter monsoons that struck the northern provinces seriously restricted flight operations. Heavy fog and low clouds frequently made it impossible to conduct air operations in the mountainous areas; therefore, the squadron was forced to concentrate most of its operations in the coastal plains. In an effort to maintain his support at a maximum level, Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun began dispatching an OE–1 to the objective area prior to scheduled missions in order to obtain a current report on the local weather conditions. Despite these efforts, the monsoon rains, which often moved in quickly from the South China Sea, still disrupted flight operations. A typical weather-related incident occurred on 13 November when a scheduled troop lift was cancelled because of heavy fog after 200 Vietnamese Special Forces troops had loaded onto 20 Marine helicopters for an early morning operation.

Several unrelated changes in official designations occurred at approximately the same time that the monsoons began affecting operations in the northern provinces. In November all Marine aircraft were redesignated in accordance with a Department of Defense order which standardized aircraft designations throughout the U.S. armed services. Thereafter, SHUFLY's HUS helicopters would be known as UH–34Ds, its OE–1s as O–1Bs, and its R4D as a C–117. In another adjustment, the Joint General Staff in Saigon ordered the realignment of South Vietnam's tactical zones. A fourth corps tactical zone (IV CTZ), which encompassed the entire Mekong Delta, and a Capital Military District, which included Saigon and its environs, were created. The composition of I Corps was affected by the adjustments as the new alignment shifted Quang Ngai Province into II Corps. The Marines, however, continued to provide helicopter support to the province, which was relatively isolated from the remainder of II Corps.

More important than either the new aircraft designations or the realignment of the tactical zones were several internal changes within the Marine task unit. On 6 November the task unit was redesignated Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6. That same day Lieutenant Colonel Alton W. McCully, who had been functioning as Colonel

Ireland's executive officer, assumed command of the task element. Ireland returned to Okinawa where he took command of Marine Aircraft Group 16, which, under the new arrangement, became responsible for both the administrative and logistical support of SHUFLY.

Marine People-to-People Program

The concept of the People-to-People Program, which had been initiated with a degree of success in the Mekong Delta, was brought to Da Nang by Colonel Ireland and his Marines. During the fall and early winter of 1962, as weather caused flight operations to subside, the Marines were able to increase the tempo of the program. SHUFLY's men actively supported an orphanage in Da Nang which was maintained by an American missionary family. On Christmas day the Marines participated in a "Father-For-A-Day" program which had been arranged by the task element chaplain, Lieutenant Richard P. Vinson, U.S. Navy. Each orphan spent the day with a Marine who had volunteered to serve as his "father." The Vietnamese children were treated to dinner in the mess hall, presented with Christmas gifts, and then joined in singing carols with the Marines. At the conclusion of the festivities, Chaplain Vinson presented the director of the orphanage with a gift in Vietnamese currency equivalent to over 800 dollars—money which the men of the task element had donated.

In addition to their activities associated with the orphanage, the Marine officers taught English to a number of Vietnamese civilians. Held three nights weekly, the classes were received enthusiastically. Beyond the foundations of good will which it helped shape, the People-to-People Program enabled the Marines to acquire a better understanding of the Vietnamese people, their culture, and their problems.

SHUFLY Operations in I Corps

SHUFLY's initial helicopter support operations in I Corps represented the beginnings of what would become a long association of U.S. Marines with South Vietnam's rugged northern provinces. Essentially these early operations were characterized by continuity and adjustment. Since their arrival at Da Nang in September the Marines had extended the standard of consistent and effective combat support operations set earlier in the flat Mekong Delta. Necessarily, SHUFLY's commanders had modified the previously developed tactics and techniques to fit the mountainous terrain and the nature of warfare being waged in I Corps. For the most part these adjustments had proven successful by allowing the Marines to continue the pace of helicopter support with a reduction of the risks involved. That SHUFLY had suffered its first fatalities during these initial months in I Corps dampened but did not detract from its overall achievements. As 1962 closed, the Marines had begun establishing a reputation in the northern provinces as courageous, professional fighting men and generous allies. It was this reputation upon which a generation of Marines would build in the ensuing decade.

CHAPTER 7

The Laotian Crisis, 1962

Genesis of the Problem—The American Response—The Marine Corps Role—Marine Participation: A Summary

Genesis of the Problem

Almost simultaneous with SHUFLY's deployment to Soc Trang in April 1962, U.S. Marine combat forces were ordered to Thailand in response to the growing crisis in Laos. Inhabited for the most part by peaceful hill tribes, the small, landlocked Kingdom of Laos seemed an unlikely setting for any significant military confrontation. Even more improbable was the possibility that a serious international crisis could stem from what had begun as a political rivalry among relatively obscure princes.

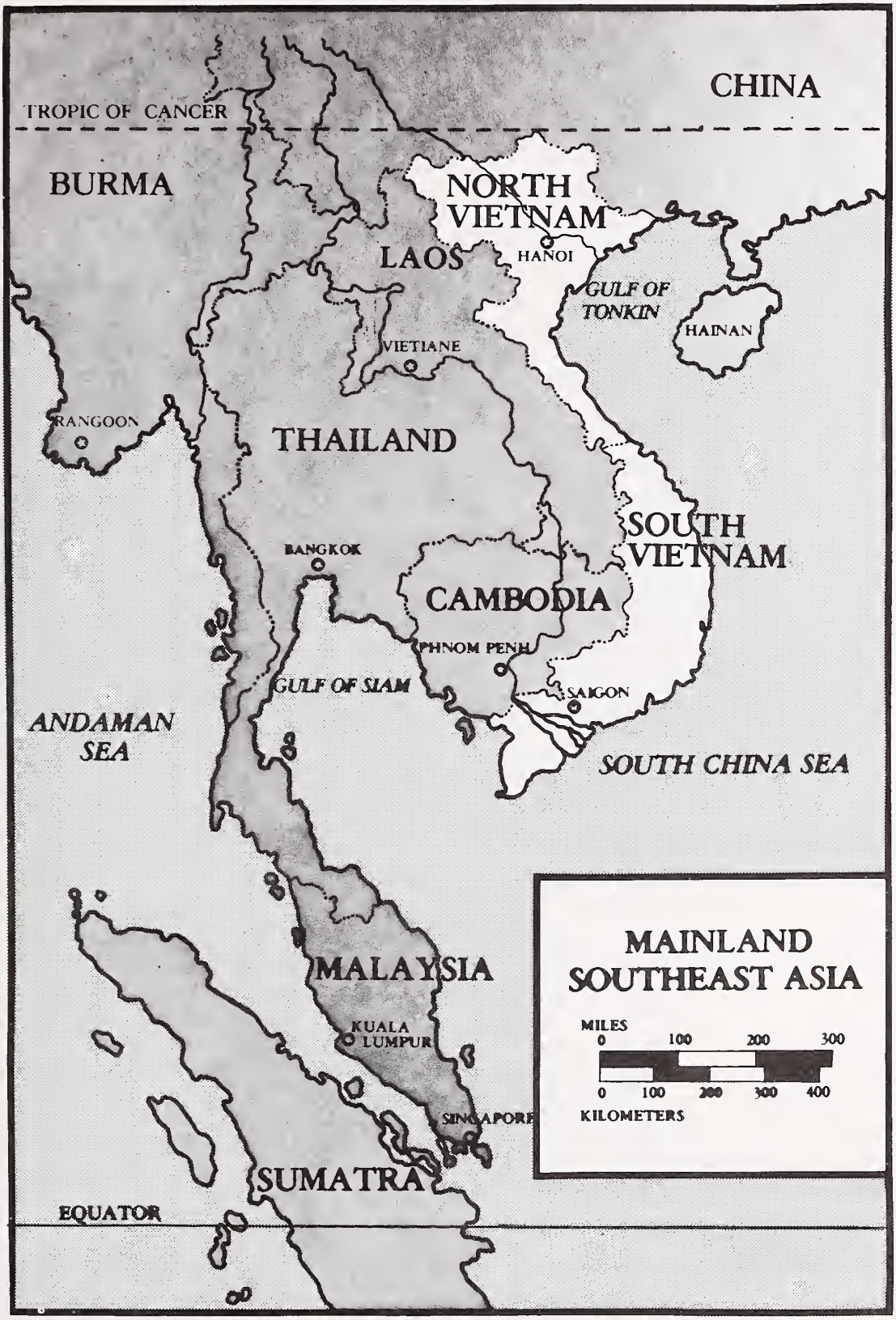
To be certain, the context of what should have been a rather meaningless political feud had been altered substantively by North Vietnam's drive to extend its control over the Republic of Vietnam. Recognizing Laos as a strategic stepping stone for their southward thrust, the North Vietnamese, joined by the Soviet Union, had begun providing military aid to the Pathet Lao army of the leftist prince, Souphanauvong, in the late 1950s. To counter these Communist activities, the United States had extended military assistance to the anti-Communist government of Prince Boun Oum. In the resultant struggle, Prince Souvanna Phouma, who previously had proclaimed neutrality, sided with the Pathet Lao. With the lines drawn and the contenders now reinforced by powerful allies, the conflict naturally escalated. Laos, like South Vietnam, had become a pawn in the Cold War.

Administered through a small USMAAG, the American military assistance to Boun Oum, however, did little to slow the advances of the Pathet Lao. Early in 1960, they had joined forces with North Vietnamese units to seize control of the eastern portion of the country's long, southward extending panhandle. In early 1961, again backed by North Vietnamese forces, the Pathet Lao had opened an offensive on the Plain of Jars in central Laos. Boun Oum's units, commanded by General Phoumi Nosavan, proved unable to contain this push into central Laos.

By March 1961 the situation had become critical enough for President Kennedy to direct that CinCPac alert U.S. military units for possible deployment. In response, Admiral Felt activated a task force headquarters and assigned Major General Donald M. Weller, who was then serving as Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, as its commander. Designated Joint Task Force 116 in accordance with existing CinCPac contingency plans, Weller's command was to consist predominantly of Marine air and ground forces with Army and Air Force units making up the balance. Simultaneous with the activation of Weller's headquarters on Okinawa, CinCPac alerted the scattered forces earmarked for assignment to the joint task force.

Meanwhile, the Kennedy administration managed to defuse the situation somewhat by securing Soviet assistance in arranging a cease-fire in Laos. The crisis cooled further when 14 governments, including the Soviet Union, Communist China, and North Vietnam, agreed to reconvene the Geneva Conference to consider neutralization of the Kingdom of Laos. This conference convened on 16 May 1961, and together with the shaky cease-fire, brought a modicum of stability to Laos. With international tensions eased, the alert of U.S. forces in the Pacific ended. Subsequently, General Weller's JTF 116 headquarters was deactivated.

The negotiations in Geneva proved to be long and tedious. In Laos, frequent fighting, usually of a localized nature, punctuated the cease-fire almost from the day it was effected. Finally, in the first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SOUTH VIETNAM
BANGKOK
CAMBODIA
PHNOM PENH
GULF OF SIAM
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weeks of 1962 heavy fighting broke out anew, this time on a general scale, and precipitated a new and more intense crisis. For U.S. observers the situation seemed to reach its critical point in early May when Pathet Lao forces, backed by North Vietnamese formations, routed a major element of Phouma's army from Nam Tha, a town located east of the Mekong River in extreme northwestern Laos. Following this action, Phoumi's forces retreated southwestward across the Mekong into northern Thailand. Now in full control of the east bank of the Mekong, the Communists appeared poised for a drive into Thailand, a full-fledged member of SEATO. The collapse of Phoumi's military forces, moreover, seriously threatened the U.S. bargaining position at the ongoing Geneva talks.

The American Response

In the face of the situation along the Laotian-Thai border, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff instructed CinCPac to upgrade the readiness of Joint Task Force 116 for possible deployment. Accordingly, on 10 May Admiral Felt directed Major General John Condon, the Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, to activate the joint task force headquarters, assemble its staff, and refine its deployment plans. The Amphibious Ready Group of the Seventh Fleet, carrying the Special Landing Force, promptly sailed into the Gulf of Siam.

Both to reassure Thailand of the U.S. commitment to its defense and to discourage further Communist advances on the Southeast Asian Peninsula, President Kennedy ordered U.S. forces deployed to Thailand on 15 May. Admiral Felt moved immediately to execute this decision. In simultaneous actions CinCPac designated Army Lieutenant General John L. Richardson, then serving as Deputy Commander in Chief, U.S. Army, Pacific, to replace Major General Condon as Commander, JTF 116 and instructed Richardson to execute CinCPac Operations Plan 32–59, Phase II (Laos). Felt's instructions to the new Commander, JTF 116 were explicit. General Richardson's command was to act in such a way that would leave no doubt as to American intentions to defend Thailand. Through these same actions JTF 116 was to exert a "precautionary impact" on the situation in Laos. Furthermore, the Commander, JTF 116 was directed to position his forces in a manner so that they could respond to any armed Communist threat to Thailand.[1]

Concurrently with the order to deploy JTF 116, CinCPac instructed the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, General Harkins, to establish and assume command of a U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand (USMACThai). Thus Harkins, in a dual role as ComUSMACV and ComUSMACThai, was to be responsible to CinCPac for all U.S. military activities and operations in both Thailand and South Vietnam. Once it became operational in Thailand, JTF 116 plus the already existing Joint U.S. Military Advisory Assistance Group, Thailand (JUSMAAG), were to come under Harkins' purview. Until USMACThai and the JTF staffs could become operational, however, the various task force components were to report to the Chief JUSMAAG, Thailand, Major General J. F. Conway, U.S. Army.

One element of the joint task force was already in Thailand when President Kennedy issued the order to commit U.S. forces—the Army's 1st Brigade, 27th Infantry. At the time this infantry brigade was participating in a SEATO exercise near Korat, a town located about 130 miles northeast of Bangkok in the central portion of the country. In response to CinCPac orders it promptly moved into bivouac at a position 40 miles west of Korat.

The Marine Corps Role

Operations Plan 32–59, Phase II (Laos), called for a U.S. Marine expeditionary brigade composed of a regimental landing team (three reinforced infantry battalions), a jet attack squadron, a helicopter transport squadron, and supporting units, to operate from Udorn, a provincial capital located nearly 350 miles northeast of Bangkok. Strategically situated only 35 miles south of Vientiane, the political capital of Laos, Udorn was the site of a 7,000-foot concrete runway. A 300-man Marine aviation support unit, Marine Air Base Squadron 16, had actually been positioned at this airstrip for over six months during 1961. While at Udorn the MABS–16 Marines had provided maintenance support for helicopters which were assisting General Phoumi's forces in Laos. A Royal Thai regiment had provided security for the

Aerial view of Udorn airstrip. (USMC Photo A182977).

base during this unit's deployment and was still in the area in 1962 when the decision was made to commit JTF 116 to Thailand.

Lieutenant Colonel Harvey M. Patton's VMA–332, an A–4C (Skyhawk) jet attack squadron, claimed the distinction of being the first Marine unit to arrive in Thailand in response to the 1962 Laotian crisis. The 20 single-placed Skyhawks departed the Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Philippines on the morning of 18 May, were refueled in flight by aircraft from VMA–211, another Marine A–4 squadron, and landed at Udorn around noon. The bulk of the Marine units began arriving in Thailand the following day. At Bangkok the Special Landing Force, composed of Lieutenant Colonel Harold W. Adams' 1,500-man Battalion Landing Team 3/9 and Lieutenant Colonel Fred A. Steele's HMM–261, an HUS–1 helicopter squadron, disembarked from the ships of the Amphibious Ready Group.* That same day Marine GV–1 refueler-transports began airlifting additional aviation support detachments from Okinawa to Udorn. These included detachments of Marine Air Control Squadrons 2 and 4 (MACS–2 and -4), Marine Air Base Squadron 12 (MABS–12), and a Provisional Marine Aircraft Group (ProvMAG) headquarters. Upon landing Colonel Ross S. Mickey, the commander of the ProvMAG, established his headquarters at the airfield and assumed operational control of all USMC aviation

*A Marine battalion landing team derives its designation from the infantry battalion around which it is built, in this case the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. In 1962, the BLT included a howitzer battery, a tank platoon, an amphibious tractor platoon, a pioneer platoon, a motor transport platoon, an antitank platoon, and air and naval gunfire liaison teams.

Following the commitment of the SLF on 19 May, another BLT and helicopter squadron from Okinawa reconstituted the Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force.

elements at Udorn. On the 18th, HMM–261's helicopters began arriving at the now busy airfield, having flown from the Amphibious Ready Group with a refueling stop at Korat. Lieutenant Colonel Steele reported to the newly activated ProvMAG.

On 19 May Brigadier General Ormand B. Simpson arrived at Udorn with the staff and communications personnel of the 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade (3d MEB) headquarters. Simpson, a Texan who had been serving as Assistant Division Commander, 3d Marine Division, had assembled and activated this headquarters on Okinawa shortly after CinCPac's activation of JTF 116. As Commanding General, 3d MEB, Simpson was to assume command of all Marine elements, air and ground, deployed to Udorn. In addition to being the CG 3d MEB, General Simpson carried the designation, Naval Component Commander, a title which gave him responsibility for all Navy as well as Marine forces operating at Udorn under JTF 116.

Concurrent with General Simpson's arrival, U.S. Air Force C–130 and C–123 transports were ferrying Lieutenant Colonel Adams' Battalion Landing Team from Bangkok to Udorn. The BLT had placed its supplies and trucks, along with HMM–261's heavier equipment, on rail cars for transport to Udorn. Because the Thai flat cars were too small to accommodate such massive vehicles, Adams ordered his tank and amphibious tractor platoons to re-embark on board the USS *Point Defiance* (LSD-31). Once on the ground at Udorn the battalion and its remaining reinforcements assembled alongside the airstrip. From there the Leathernecks were transported by Thai Army trucks some eight miles south to Nong Ta Kai, a small town situated astride the main service road. Adams' battalion established a temporary camp on some high ground just beyond the town. With the BLT's arrival, the initial Marine combat forces assigned to JTF 116 were in position. The next day, 20 May, General Simpson assumed command of all U.S. Marine and Navy units at Udorn and the 3d MEB, a complete air-ground team, was in being.

Elsewhere in Thailand the U.S. military build-up was continuing apace. A squadron of 20 U.S. Air Force F–100 Super Sabre tactical fighter bombers and a detachment of three refueler aircraft had deployed to Takhli airfield from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. Two USAF transport squadrons had also begun operations from this base. At Korat, the 1st Brigade, 27th Infantry was being reinforced with Army units from Hawaii. Another Army unit, a logistics support command, was being activated near Bangkok.

To command this growing assortment of military units, General Richardson established the JTF 116 headquarters at Korat. Major General Donald M. Weller, who had been serving as Deputy Commanding General, FMFPac, since leaving the 3d Marine Division in 1961, joined Richardson's headquarters as chief of staff. General Weller's offices were located at Korat initially. Later he relocated at Bangkok where he headed a rear echelon responsible for coordination with the JUSMAAG, ComUSMACThai, and the American representatives to SEATO. While in the capital Weller was also responsible for implementing a logistic plan, the objective of which was to upgrade lines of communication being used by JTF–116 elements.

It is of interest to note that Colonel Croizat, who had been the first U.S. Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, was serving at this time as the senior U.S. military representative on the SEATO planning staff in Bangkok. Both Weller, who had commanded JTF 116 for a period during early 1961, and Croizat who had served as its chief of staff during that interval, were intimately familar with the JTF's structure, capabilities, and functions. In fact, the operations plan being executed had been developed in large part under their guidance.[2]

Another facet of this particular situation was that portions of Operations Plan 32–59 Phase II, (Laos) were to exert a profound influence on later U.S. Marine operations in the Republic of Vietnam. A key provision of this particular document outlined the command relationships which would govern Marine and Air Force tactical air support in the event JTF 116 actually became involved in combat. This provision designated the Commander JTF 116 as the "coordinating authority" responsible for synchronizing all JTF tactical air support. But at the same time it assigned the CG, 3d MEB, operational control of all Marine tactical aircraft, thereby insuring that the Marine air-ground team would not be fractured. Later, in the mid-1960s when American tactical jet squadrons would be called upon to support U.S. and RVNAF ground forces in South Vietnam, the CinCPac staff would

Marines disembark from attack transports at Bangkok, Thailand. (USMC Photo A182785).

Major General Donald M. Weller, Chief of Staff, Joint Task Force—116. (USMC Photo A407463).

borrow heavily from this arrangement to define the relationships of Marine and Air Force tactical aviation assets.

Training began almost immediately after the Marine units were in position at Udorn and Nong Ta Kai. Generally the MEB adhered to a training program designed to help fulfill three requirements: to make its presence known and thereby enhance its credibility as a "show of force"; to acclimatize the individual Marines to the hot, humid, tropical climate; and finally, to familarize the operational elements and their commanders with the surrounding terrain. The primary objective of this program, of course, was to prepare the brigade for combat should that contingency arise out of the troubled situation in Laos. Coordinated air-ground exercises conducted around Udorn enabled General Simpson's command to publicize its presence in the area while concurrently refining its heliborne and close air support capabilities.* In addition to air-ground exercises, Lieutenant Colonel Adams' infantry companies sharpened their skills in patrolling of all types and made frequent use of nearby Thai Army firing ranges to maintain their weapons proficiency. All field training was conducted in an unpopulated area defined by the Thai government and every precaution was taken so as not to disturb the local population. The Marine units utilized blank ammunition exclusively in training except for the closely supervised live fire exercises.

Realizing that the ultimate success or failure of the American commitment in Thailand might hinge on the relationships U.S. military men established with the Thai populace, General Simpson ordered his command to initiate a civic action program. The day after his arrival at Udorn, Simpson met with local civilian officials and established the basis for a people-to-people program similar to the one instituted by SHUFLY Marines at Soc Trang. Thereafter, the MEB's goal in this area was to foster among the Thai a favorable impression of the individual Marine, his commanders, and his

Brigadier General Ormond R. Simpson and Brigadier General John F. Dobbin confer at Udorn, Thailand. (USMC Photo A182779).

*The MEB's after action report pointed out one flaw in the composition of the Provisional MAG. There had been no provision made to include light observation aircraft in its organization. As a result, aerial reconnaissance had to be accomplished from either A–4Cs or HUS–1s, neither of which was configured for such a mission. The A–4C, which could carry only the pilot, and the HUS–1 proved equally unsuited for reconnaissance missions. The 3d MEB report specifically recommended that future composite aviation packages of this nature should include a detachment of OEs with pilots and trained aerial observers.

unit. The people-to-people program which followed was, in all respects, a concerted and integrated effort. Officers taught conversational English classes to interested civilians both at Udorn and at Nong Ta Kai, while Leatherneck engineers and Navy Seabees (who arrived near the end of May) helped repair public buildings. Navy medical and dental personnel attached to Colonel Mickey's ProvMAG and Lieutenant Colonel Adams' BLT joined the effort by administering almost daily to the physical ailments of the local populace and occasionally visiting the more remote villages by helicopter. In an action intended to help prevent friction between Marines and Thai townspeople, General Simpson directed that MEB units disembark from trucks as they approached towns, march through the population centers at sling arms, and re-embark aboard their trucks at the opposite end of the town. Relying on this broad array of simple but effective programs, the 3d MEB was able to impress upon the civilian population that its mission was one of assistance and good will rather than occupation.

This crisis in Laos eased somewhat after the U.S. joint task force established its presence in northeastern Thailand, and Communist forces halted their advance short of the international border. With these two developments there was no requirement for additional Marine infantry battalions. Accordingly, General Simpson redesignated his force the 3d Marine Expeditionary Unit (3d MEU), even though other reinforcements continued to arrive at Udorn throughout May and most of June. Near the end of May, a 70-man Seabee detachment from Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 10 was airlifted to the position. This detachment, the initial increment of a larger Logistics Support Group (LSG), moved to Nong Ta Kai where it helped the BLT's pioneer platoon complete a more permanent camp designed to withstand the approaching monsoon season. In mid-June, with no end to the MEU's assignment in sight, the remainder of the 500-man LSG deployed from Okinawa to Udorn. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert S. Hudson, this group included a motor transport detachment, a medical detachment, a supply unit, and an engineer detachment.* These reinforcements brought the number of Marines, Seabees, and Navy medical and dental personnel under General Simpson's command to its highest level—3,426 officers and men. A final change in the composition of the 3d MEU occurred in the final week of June when HMM–162, an HUS–1 squadron commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Reinhardt Leu, replaced HMM–261 as the helicopter element.

While General Simpson's MEU was strengthening its posture in northeastern Thailand, U.S. officials were reporting definite progress in the negotiations being held in Geneva and Vientiane. Encouraged by these signs and hoping to influence the Geneva talks even further, President Kennedy ordered major elements of the U.S. combat forces withdrawn from Thailand on 29 June, just four days after HMM–162's arrival at Udorn. In response General Richardson directed General Simpson to prepare for the immediate withdrawal of the ProvMAG and one infantry company. Two days later, on the morning of 1 July, VMA–332's Skyhawks launched for Cubi Point in the Philippines. Subsequently, HMM–162's helicopters departed for Bangkok where they re-embarked on board the USS *Valley Forge*. Okinawa-based GV–1s airlifted one of BLT 3/9's companies to the Philippines while elements of the Marine air control squadrons traveled by rail to Bangkok for embarkation on board ships of the Seventh Fleet. By 6 July General Simpson's 3d MEU had been reduced by just over 1,000 men.

At Geneva, the first weeks of July were marked by steady progress toward a diplomatic solution to the long-standing Laotian problem. By the 20th it was evident that a formal agreement would soon be forthcoming. With these encouraging developments, General Richardson was directed to prepare for the withdrawal of the remainder of his forces from Thailand. In Laos, the quarreling political factions had already agreed to participate in a coalition government headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma which would serve as the basis for a neutral state. At Geneva on the 23d, the United States, the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Burma, Great Britain, France, Canada, India, Communist China, Thailand, Poland, the Kingdom of Laos, and Cambodia finally signed the Declaration of Neutrality of Laos and an attached protocol. In so doing the 14 signatories agreed to recognize and respect the sovereignty, independ-

*Lieutenant Colonel Hudson was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Angus J. Cronin on 22 July.

Marines of BLT 3/9 assemble before being airlifted to the Philippines. (USMC Photo A182883).

ence, and neutrality of the Kingdom of Laos. Under the terms of this agreement, foreign troops were prohibited from entering or operating within the borders of Laos. Had it been adherred to, this provision would have denied North Vietnam the use of the corridor down the length of eastern Laos, altering the scope and nature of the conflict in the Republic of Vietnam.

Following the signing of this declaration in Geneva, CinCPac directed General Richardson to effect the withdrawal of the remainder of his joint task force. General Simpson's 3d MEU began executing these instructions on the 28th when Marine GV–1s and Air Force C–130s began airlifting Lieutenant Colonel Adams' BLT 3/9 to Okinawa. By the 31st no Marine combat units were left at Udorn. General Simpson and his staff departed the airfield a few days later, and shortly thereafter the 3d Marine Expeditionary Unit was deactivated.

Marine Participation: A Summary

The deactivation of the 3d MEU marked the end of the first deployment of a Marine air-ground combat team to mainland Southeast Asia. Since the decision to commit American forces to Thailand in mid-May, the Marine units assigned to General Simpson had demonstrated anew the value of their service as a force capable of supporting U.S. foreign policy on short notice. Within the period of a few days, the various FMFPac commands had assembled a complete air-ground-support team, and, assisted by the Seventh Fleet, had deployed the affected units to a position over 1,800 miles from the nearest major Marine base. Located far inland from the seacoast, a Marine unit's normal habitat, the 3d MEU had been sustained solely by air while maintaining its combat readiness in a difficult tropical environment.

In so doing the Marines had shown that a substantial American combat force could be brought to bear quickly in the remote areas chosen by the Communists as targets for their so-called "wars of national liberation." Furthermore, the MEU by relying on a vigorous civic action program, had established that a sizable Marine command could maintain its combat readiness almost indefinitely without eroding the respect of the indigenous population. Thus, General Simpson's Marines had created a solid foundation of mutual respect and confidence with the Thai people. This accomplishment alone would prove valuable when American military forces would be required to return to northern Thailand later in the decade. Against the backdrop of these accomplishments, the 3d Marine Expeditionary Unit's operations in Thailand could be assessed as having extended the tradition of the U.S. Marine Corps as an effective instrument of American diplomacy.

PART III
THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES, 1963

CHAPTER 8

The Marine Advisory Effort

The Political Climate—The Advisory Division and VNMC Operations—Accomplishments

The Political Climate

A sudden rupture occurred in South Vietnam's internal political situation during 1963 which largely determined the course of the war as well as the nation's future. Following the sect uprising of 1955–1956, the Diem government had experienced a three-year period of relative political tranquility. Beginning in 1959, however, political dissent had begun to re-emerge from several influential segments of South Vietnamese society. The results of the August 1959 national elections, in which pro Diem candidates captured every seat in the National Assembly, served to stimulate political opposition which had lain dormant for nearly four years. Opposition to the government mounted steadily in the months following the elections within military as well as political circles as some South Vietnamese officers began privately expressing disenchantment with Diem's management of the war. Then came the abortive coup in November 1960. The regime's popularity diminished in the wake of this crisis as Diem tightened his control on the war-torn nation.

Another problem—religious unrest—which was to play a key role in determining South Vietnam's political direction as the decade unfolded, also emerged during this period. Buddhist leaders throughout South Vietnam began protesting against various policies enacted by the Catholic-controlled government. The tensions gradually mounted, and by early 1963 the protests were highlighted by spectacular and highly publicized self-immolations by Buddhist monks. Finally, in May, the religious problem erupted into violence when the Vietnamese police and military forces killed 12 Buddhist demonstrators while suppressing a religious demonstration at Hue. This action triggered a protracted crisis of public confidence in the Diem government which deepened as the summer wore on. Then, on 21 August, Ngo Dinh Nhu, the president's closest political advisor, ordered the national police to raid key Buddhist pagodas throughout the nation. Following the raids, which uncovered some weapons, Nhu attempted to blame the attacks on several key South Vietnamese generals. His effort to shift the responsibility for the police raids served only to alienate some of the nation's most powerful military leaders.

On 1 November, a junta of South Vietnamese generals led by Major General Duong Van Minh reacted to the deepening political crisis by deposing President Diem and seizing control of the Government of Vietnam. Both the president and his brother were murdered by an ARVN officer the following day. The U.S. government, which had advance knowledge of the coup and was in contact with the plotting generals, publically declared its intention to remain neutral. General Harkins ordered USMACV to cease all activities and to withdraw its advisors from South Vietnamese units pending the outcome of the power struggle.

The overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem stirred fresh hope among many Americans and South Vietnamese that the new government could attract the solid public support of the Vietnamese people, and thereby wage a more effective war against the Communists. South Vietnam's new leaders immediately focused their attention upon healing the nation's deep political divisions and securing continued U.S. assistance for the war effort. They pledged to respect religious freedom, to return the government to civilian control, and to continue the struggle against the Viet Cong. Appreciating the interrelationship of these assurances, the United States officially recognized the new govern-

ment on 7 November, whereupon ComUSMACV lifted the temporary ban on military assistance.

The American hopes that the new political climate in the Republic of Vietnam would stimulate a more effective military effort, however, proved to be shortlived. Confusion reminiscent of the sect uprising in 1955 spread throughout the government following Diem's death. The dismissal of more than 30 high-ranking military officers for actively supporting the former president during the coup typified the new regime's campaign to realign top personnel in all governmental agencies. Far from enhancing the efficiency of the Vietnamese military, the power struggle and the chaos which prevailed in its wake dragged the war effort to its most ineffective level since before the U.S. stepped-up its military assistance program in early 1962. It was on this unfortunate note that the year 1963 ended.

The Advisory Division and VNMC Operations

At the beginning of 1963, the Marine Advisory Division, still headed by Lieutenant Colonel Moody, consisted of eight Marine officers and 10 noncommissioned officers. In April, however, the table of organization was adjusted slightly when the first sergeant and four assistant infantry advisor (noncommissioned officers) billets were eliminated. Another small unit training advisor was added to the organization, changing the strength of Lieutenant Colonel Moody's command to eight officers and six noncommissioned officers. Men from the 3d Marine Division continued to augment the advisory effort and gain combat experience while serving in Vietnam on temporary assignments.

Like the U.S. organization which advised and assisted it, the Vietnamese Marine Corps began the new year at the same strength that it had achieved when it had been expanded to brigade size in early 1962. Still commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Le Nguyen Khang, the Vietnamese Marine Brigade continued to operate as part of the nation's general reserve under the direct control of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff.

As the year opened three of the four VNMC infantry battalions were garrisoned separately in small, crude, self-sustaining camps around Thu Duc on the northern outskirts of Saigon. The 4th Battalion maintained its camp at Vung Tau on the coast. The newly formed artillery battalion, which became fully operational in mid-January when B and C Batteries passed their final gunnery examinations, was garrisoned near Thu Duc. While the Marine units spent little time in their base camps, being deployed almost continuously in combat, the Joint General Staff normally kept one battalion at Thu Duc to enable it to respond to any emergency which might develop.

For the Vietnamese Marine Corps, 1963 was to be highlighted by innovations in the important areas of training and operations. Prior to Lieutenant Colonel Moody's arrival in Vietnam, all Vietnamese Marine recruits had received basic training at ARVN installations, an arrangement tolerated but never appreciated by the U.S. Marine advisors. Before his departure in the fall of 1963, Moody was able to convince Khang that he should push for the authority to establish a separate Marine training center. In late 1963 the JGS approved this proposal, whereupon the Vietnamese Marine engineers, advised by Captain Robert C. Jones, began building a small training facility at Thu Duc. In a related action Moody set in motion plans to have a small number of specially selected Vietnamese Marine noncommissioned officers sent to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at San Diego for training as drill instructors. Although these plans would not come to fruition during Moody's assignment, the concept of a separate recruit training center promised to permit the Vietnamese Marine Corps to establish and maintain its own standards for basic training.

Another change to occur in 1963, this one in the area of tactical operations, was the reinstitution of multi-battalion combat operations under the control of provisional Marine Brigade headquarters.* Although the VNMC had performed such operations in 1960, they had been abandoned in the ensuing years in favor of battalion-sized deployments to the various provinces and corps tactical zones. Moody, however, prevailed upon Khang to alter this pattern by seeking assignments

*Such task-organized Marine forces were usually called either provisional brigades or provisional regiments but on at least one occasion the organization was designated a Marine Task Force. In each case the composition was similar—two or three infantry battalions, an artillery unit, an engineer or reconnaissance company, and a command element.

Lieutenant General Carson A. Roberts, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (right center), inspects an honor guard of Vietnamese Marines in Saigon. With him, from left, are Lieutenant Colonel Le Nguyen Khang, Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps; Major General Richard G. Weede, Chief of Staff, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; and Lieutenant Colonel Clarence G. Moody, Jr., Senior USMC Advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. (Official USA Photo).

that would enable the brigade headquarters to exercise tactical control of its battalions.

The first such operation was launched in the first week of the new year. On 1 January a provisional brigade headquarters, commanded by Khang and advised by Moody, embarked on board a Vietnamese Navy LST (landing ship, tank) at Saigon along with the 2d VNMC battalion. The 4th VNMC Battalion, advised by Captain Don R. Christensen, embarked on board two Vietnamese LSMs (landing ship, medium) at the same time. The mission of the provisional brigade was to conduct an amphibious landing near the tip of the Ca Mau Peninsula and clear Viet Cong units from a series of villages in conjunction with the Strategic Hamlet Program. Subsequent to the clearing operations, VNMC engineers were to construct a fortified hamlet. The entire operation was to extend until mid-April.

Elaborate precautions were taken not to disclose the location of the objective area. The small flotilla sailed beyond sight of land and remained afloat for two days before moving into position off Ca Mau. On 3 January the two LSMs proceeded to the coast, moved up a river lined with thick mangrove vegetation, and landed the 4th Battalion. The 2d Battalion, accompanied by Captain Richard B. Taylor, came ashore from the LST in Dong Nai boats, small styrofoam craft specifically designed for use in swampy terrain. The provisional brigade headquarters remained on board the LST as the

U.S. Marine-trained drill instructor with Vietnamese recruits. (USMC Photo A183561).

designated operations area did not extend far inland.

To their surprise the VNMC assault elements found the first objective, a large village, completely deserted. As Lieutenant Colonel Moody later recalled, "They had removed everything, even the cattle and other livestock."[1] At the second objective, a nearby village, the Marines found definite evidence of recent Viet Cong activity but no enemy troops. There they captured a handful of rifles, carbines, and light mortars along with a printed document that contained detailed excerpts of the Marine operations plan. Quite obviously the operation had been compromised in Saigon during the planning stages. In any case, this discovery explained the evacuation of the initial objective as well as the relative dearth of action during the remainder of the operation.

The provisional headquarters and the 4th Battalion returned to Saigon after the initial phases of the operation had been executed, leaving the 2d Battalion and an engineer platoon to continue security operations in the area and build the strategic hamlet.* When the operation finally ended on 11 April, the Vietnamese Marines had lost a total of five men killed and 14 wounded. Mines and snipers had produced most of these casualties. The Marines accounted for 11 Viet Cong killed and 14 wounded.

In the closing days of April, the JGS ordered Lieutenant Colonel Khang to form two infantry battalions and an artillery element into a provisional brigade for immediate assignment to II Corps. There the Vietnamese Marines were to join

*Lieutenant Colonel Moody noted that the Vietnamese Marines seldom were involved in the actual construction of strategic hamlets. This task was normally left to the civil authorities in the area who more often than not used the local population as a labor force. (*Moody Comments.*)

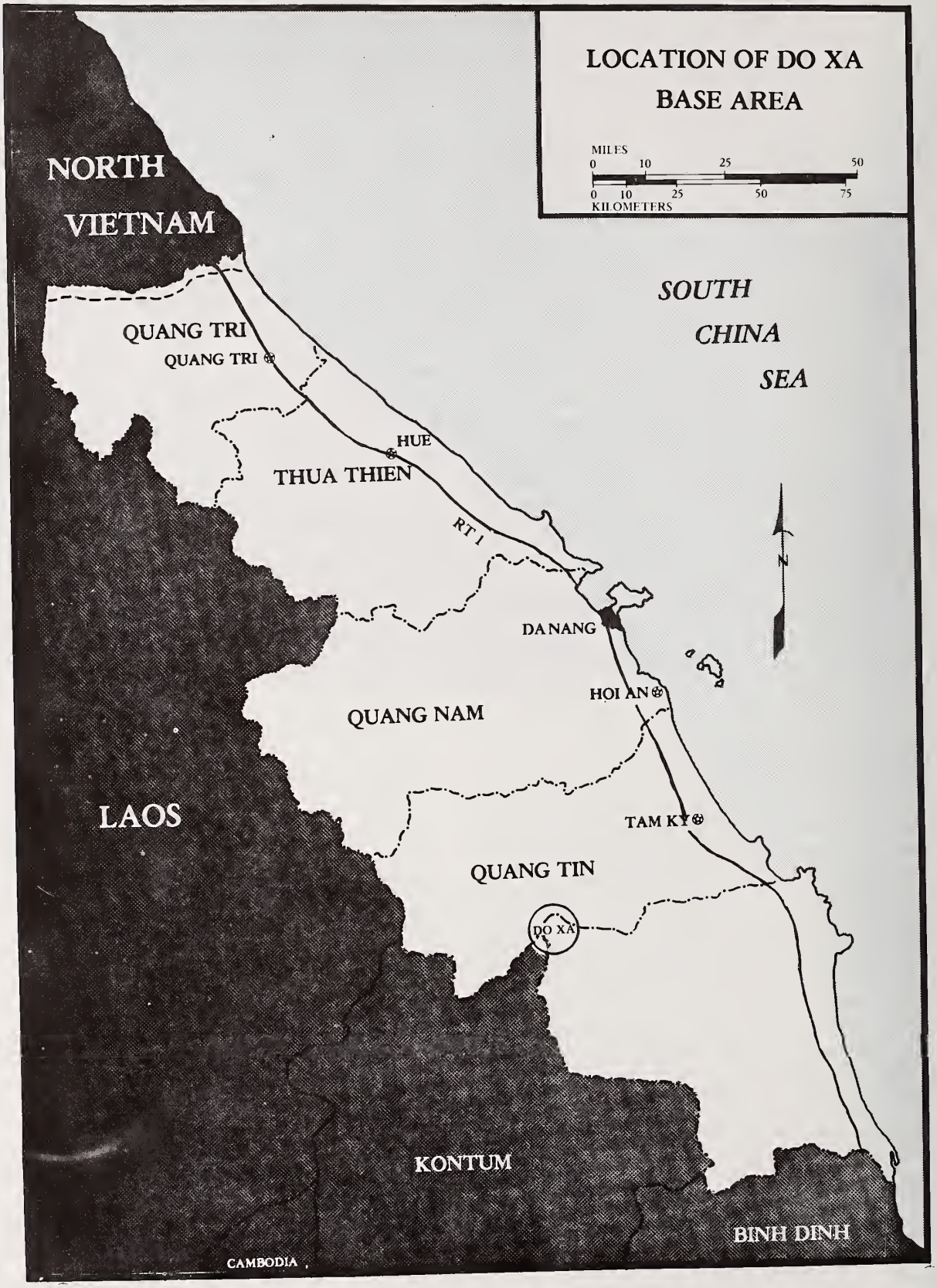
elements of the 2d and 25th ARVN Divisions for a multi-regiment thrust into the rugged mountains just south of the I Corps-II Corps border. Code named BACH PHOUNG XI, this offensive was to penetrate the Do Xa, a Viet Cong base area never before entered by government forces. Centered in that portion of the Annamite Mountains where the borders of Quang Tin, Quang Ngai, and Kontum Provinces converged, the Do Xa had been under Communist control since the early stages of the French-Indochina War. In this remote, inaccessible mountainous zone the Viet Cong reportedly had built-up extensive staging areas and training camps. Prisoner interrogations obtained throughout the early 1960s revealed that many North Vietnamese soldiers entering the South's northern provinces had infiltrated the Do Xa before moving into the densely populated coastal lowlands of Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. Additionally, the area was thought to contain the Communist military headquarters for Military Region 5 (MR-5).

After alerting his 2d and 4th Battalions, a pack howitzer battery, a reconnaissance platoon, and a headquarters element, Khang flew with Lieutenant Colonel Moody to Pleiku for planning conferences with Major General Nguyen Khanh and his II Corps staff. The concept of BACH PHOUNG XI, Khang and Moody learned, called for U.S. Marine and Army helicopters to lift ARVN infantry and artillery elements into positions which would form a loose ring around the suspected center of the Do Xa base area. The ARVN units would then begin contracting this ring in stages, whereupon the provisional Marine brigade would be helilifted into its center, the heart of the Do Xa, to search for Communist camps. To control the entire operation General Khanh would establish a corps headquarters forward at Plateau Gi, a Montagnard village located on the southern edge of the operations area, about 25 miles northeast of Kontum.

On 1 May, U.S. Air Force C-123 transports airlifted Khang and the 2,000-man provisional Marine brigade from the capital to Quang Ngai. Both Lieutenant Colonel Moody and Major Croft, the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor and artillery advisor, accompanied the Marine force. The next day an ARVN truck convoy transported the Marines from Quang Ngai some 40 miles north to Tam Ky, the roadside town which served as the capital of Quang Tin Province. The 2d Battalion, advised by Captain Taylor, dismounted from the trucks and assembled at Tam Ky air strip while the remainder of the convoy turned west onto a narrow dirt road which curved through the foothills and deep into the jungle-covered Annamite Chain. Meanwhile, Army H-21s from Pleiku landed at Tam Ky, loaded assault elements of the 2d Battalion, and began helilifting them into a streamside landing zone some 30 miles southwest of the provincial capital. The convoy carrying the balance of the Marine force continued its southwest motor march until it reached the small ARVN-held town of Tra My. There, some 24 miles southwest of Tam Ky, Khang established his command post in a school house adjacent to a crude little dirt airstrip. The 75mm pack howitzer battery, advised by Major Croft, set up its weapons nearby while the reconnaissance platoon and elements of the 4th Battalion, advised by Captain Christensen, established security. When these units were in place U.S. Marine UH-34Ds from Da Nang lifted a TAFDS fuel bladder and pump to the airfield. Once the helilift of the 2d Battalion was completed, the Army H-21s, refueling from the TAFDS bladder, began lifting the 4th Battalion into the 2d Battalion's landing zone, which was located several miles south of Tra My.

With the initial movement into the operations area accomplished and the brigade command post functioning, the two infantry battalions began combing a deep valley and the adjacent mountains for Communist base camps. After several days Khang's Marines located one rather complete camp but encountered no resistance upon entering the position. Once again the occupants, probably forewarned by the initial movement of the ARVN units into the area, had withdrawn ahead of the Marines. The only people found in the camp were a North Vietnamese doctor and nurse. A subsequent search of the bamboo huts and the underlying tunnel complex did produce a supply cache. The Vietnamese Marines discovered several rifles, six typewriters, three sewing machines, a radio, 44 maps, a French artillery computing board, and scores of flashlight batteries.

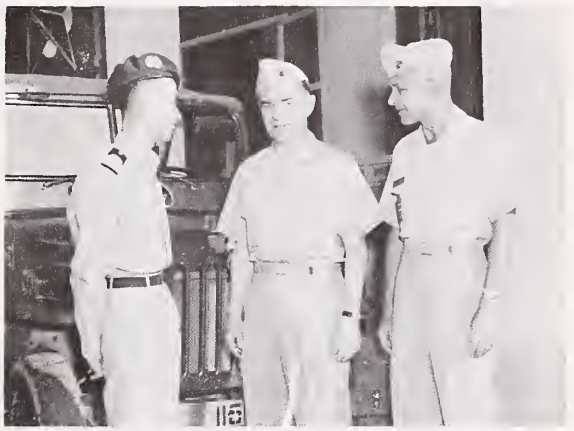
ARVN and Marine operations in the area during the next two weeks failed to locate any large Viet Cong elements. For the most part the Marines busied themselves by destroying a few abandoned


LOCATION OF DO XA BASE AREA
MILES
0 10 25 50
0 10 25 50 75
KILOMETERS
NORTH VIETNAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
QUANG TRI
QUANG TRI
HUE
THUA THIEN
RT 1
N
DA NANG
HOI AN
QUANG NAM
LAOS
TAM KY
QUANG TIN
DO XA
KONTUM
BINH DINH
CAMBODIA

camps and some cultivated crops. ARVN units operating around the Marines reported scattered action as they engaged small groups of Viet Cong attempting to escape from the center of the Do Xa. BACH PHOUNG XI concluded in mid-May when U.S. Marine UH–34Ds lifted the VNMC battalions back to Tra My. From there the Marines returned by convoy to Quang Ngai where they staged for the airlift back to Saigon. The statistics for the Marine portion of the operation revealed that only two Viet Cong soldiers had been killed. Khang's force suffered 36 wounded, most as a result of encounters with booby traps constructed from sharpened bamboo spikes. ARVN forces fared only slightly better, having killed barely a score of Communists. Except for the fact that they had demonstrated their ability to penetrate the most difficult Viet Cong sanctuary, the two week offensive into the Do Xa base area had little impact on the war effort. From the standpoint of training and experience, however, the operation was beneficial. The Vietnamese Marines and their advisors learned a great deal about construction of landing zones and about directing helicopters, fields in which they had received little previous training.*

In early September Lieutenant Colonel Wesley C. Noren, recently transferred from the 2d Marine Division where he had served as Assistant G-3, arrived in Saigon to replace Lieutenant Colonel Moody as the Senior Marine Advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps. Already selected for promotion to colonel, Noren would become the seventh Senior Marine Advisor when Moody left Vietnam in October.

In mid-October the Vietnamese Marine commanders formed a provisional regiment for Operation PHI-HOA 5, which was to be conducted in III Corps Tactical Zone.** The 1st, 3d, and 4th Battalions, supported by a composite artillery



General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, and Lieutenant Colonel Wesley G. Noren, Senior Marine Advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, confer with Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien, Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. (USMC Photo A420917).

battery and the reconnaissance company, joined ARVN, VNAF, and Vietnamese Navy units in a major search and clear campaign in the northwest corner of Gia Dinh Province, only about 20 miles southeast of Saigon. Like many other large government military operations undertaken in 1963, this one failed to uncover any major enemy forces. The Communist soldiers again managed to elude government forces. An extensive tunnel and cave network, which the Marines systematically destroyed with demolitions, was discovered under the entire area. Still, the Marines managed to kill only six Viet Cong and capture 10. Two Vietnamese Marines were killed and 36 others wounded before the operation terminated on 1 November.

The coup d'etat which toppled President Diem from power began the same day that Operation PHI–HOA 5 concluded. Instead of returning to their base camps, the 1st and 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalions, accompanied by the composite battery, moved into the capital to participate in the power struggle. These units actually launched the coup by seizing key installations in the heart of the city while the 2d VNMC Battalion blocked the highway to Bien Hoa, thus preventing loyalist intervention. Sporadic fighting against troops loyal to Diem continued until the early morning of 2 November when the 4th Battalion finally stormed

*An interesting sidelight to this operation was that it stimulated somewhat of a fad in the offices at MACV and the JGS. Military officials from Saigon who visited the brigade command post, including General Weede, took back large water-smoothed rocks as souvenirs of their trip to the infamous Viet Cong stronghold. Printed on the side of these ornate stones were the words "Do Xa, May 1963." (*Moody Comments.*)

**After the realignment of the CTZs the previous December, III Corps included a 200-mile-long section of Vietnam which encompassed the southern one third of the Central Highlands and the area south to the boundary of the Capital Military District near Saigon.

211-623 O - 77 - 8

NORTH VIETNAM
THAILAND
Mekong River
LAOS
DA NANG
I CTZ
SOUTH CHINA SEA
XXX
II CTZ
PLEIKU
QUI NHON
CAMBODIA
XXX
Mekong River
NHA TRANG
III CTZ
N
SAIGON
CAPITOL MILITARY DISTRICT
XXX
IV CTZ
SOC TRANG
CORPS TACTICAL ZONES
1963-1964
MILES
0 25 50 75 100
0 25 50 75 100
KILOMETERS

and captured the presidental palace. Four Vietnamese Marines were killed and 12 wounded during the battles in Saigon. No U.S. Marines were involved in the fighting as Lieutenant Colonel Noren directed his subordinate advisors to remain in their quarters. When the situation stabilized, the advisors rejoined their units and resumed their normal duties.

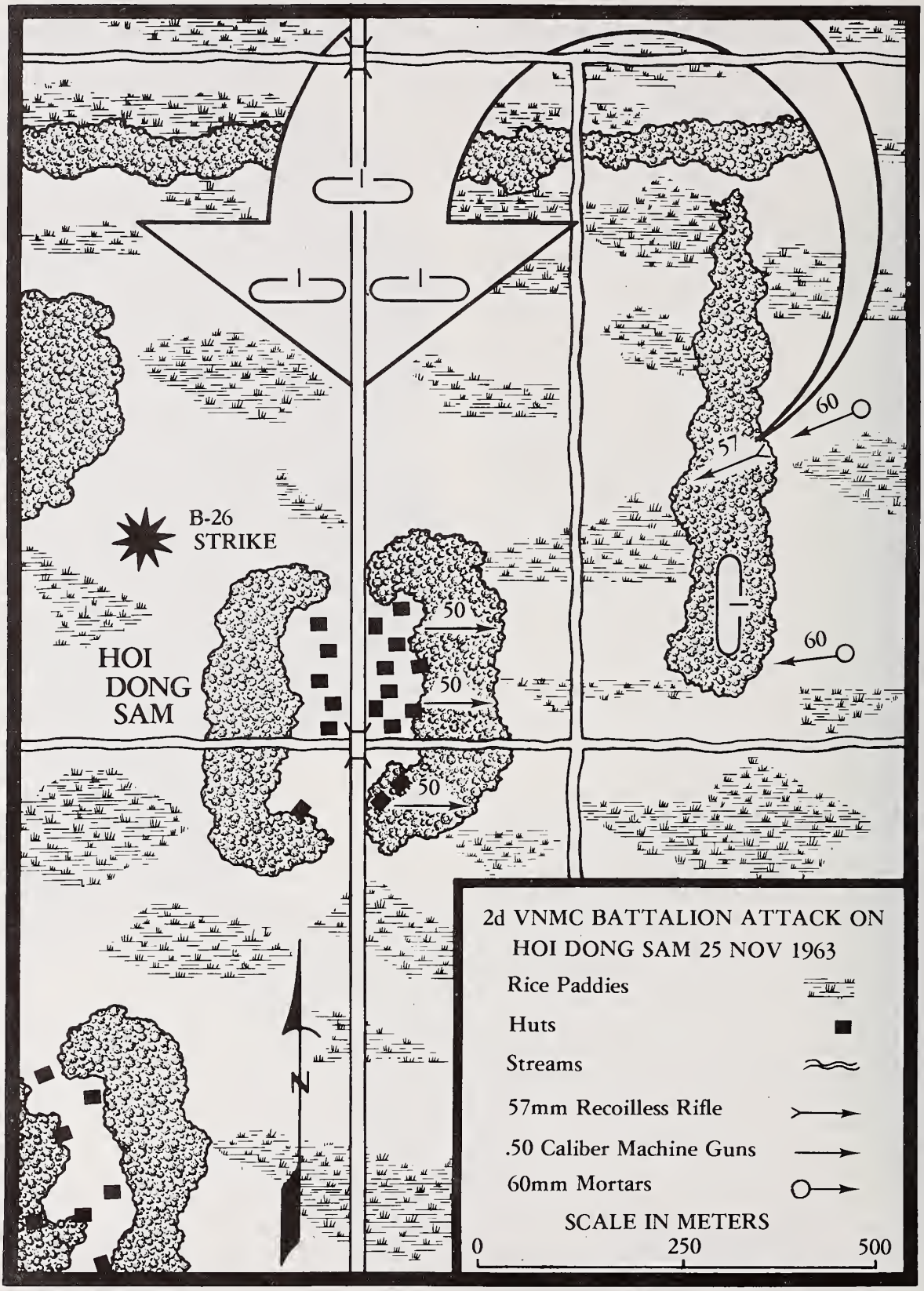
Combat operations against the Communist guerrillas resumed for the Vietnamese Marine Brigade in the second week of November. Accompanied by its U.S. Marine advisor, Captain James P. McWilliams, the 3d Battalion initiated a search and clear operation in III Corps in conjunction with the 11th ARVN Regiment on 10 November. The next day the Vietnamese Marines clashed sharply with a substantial Viet Cong force west of My Tho and suffered six killed and 21 wounded. Nineteen enemy bodies were found on the battlefield along with four weapons, several grenades, and some documents. McWilliams, respected by his fellow advisors for his candid and forthright assessments, later recalled that such encounters were the exception rather than the rule. "While the Vietnamese Marines were individually good fighters and showed tenacity in most cases against forces that would stand and fight, this was not the nature of the conflict," he lamented. More often than not, McWilliams went on to explain, the highly mobile Viet Cong could elude the larger, more cumbersome government units.[2]

On 14 November, the same day that the combined Marine-ARVN operation in III Corps terminated, the Vietnamese Marine command formed a provisional regiment to control operations DAI-PHONG 28 and 29, which were to be conducted concurrently in the same general area. Composed of the 1st and 3d Battalions, and a 75mm pack howitzer platoon, the Marine force searched until 21 November for Viet Cong units thought to be in Binh Duong Province but with discouraging results. Only one enemy was killed, two prisoners taken, and three weapons captured at the expense of five dead and 13 wounded Marines.

A week later the 2d Battalion, now advised by Captain Joseph N. Smith, fought a more typical action while participating in Operation DAI-PHONG 30. The battalion commander, Captain Nguyen Thanh Yen, received orders for the operation during the early morning hours of 25 November. Shortly after daybreak nearly 550 Vietnamese Marines boarded trucks at their camp near Thu Duc for the trip to Bien Hoa airfield. Upon arrival, officers from III Corps headquarters informed Captain Yen that his battalion was to conduct a heliborne assault against Hoi Dong Sam, a Viet Cong-held village in western Hau Nghia Province just west of Saigon. The purpose of the operation was to intercept a guerrilla force which had overrun the nearby Hiep Hoa Special Forces camp the previous day and had taken several American prisoners. The enemy unit was believed to be using Hoi Dong Sam as a way station while attempting to escape across the Cambodian border.[3]

The operation began at about 0800 when eight U.S. Army H-21 "Flying Bananas" from the 145th Aviation Battalion helilifted Captain Smith, a Vietnamese company commander, and his 90-man assault force from Bien Hoa. Eight Army UH-1B gunships and a U.S. Air Force O-1B Bird Dog observation aircraft escorted the transport helicopters on the 20-minute flight to the objective area. The gunships were put to use almost immediately when Communist .50 caliber machine gun fire erupted from a treeline at the eastern edge of the village. Under the suppressive fire of the UH-1Bs, the first wave of H-21s landed the assault force in some partially flooded rice paddies about 700 meters east of the Viet Cong positions. The Marine assault force quickly deployed into a treeline on the western edge of the landing zone. From this position the company began returning fire with rifles and .30 caliber machine guns. The Air Force forward air controller (FAC) overhead in the O-1B and the Army gunships prevented the enemy from withdrawing across the open rice paddies which surrounded the objective on the north, south, and west.

The distance between the assembly area at Bien Hoa and the landing zone combined with the scarcity of transport helicopters to slow the progress of the helilift. The landings continued at 40-minute intervals while the UH-1B gunships teamed with the Vietnamese Marine assault force to suppress the enemy's fire. The last elements of the battalion were finally landed about two hours after the initial assault. Largely because of the effective suppressive fires from the air and ground, no aircraft were hit during the helilift.


B-26
STRIKE
HOI
DONG
SAM
50
50
50
60
57
60
N
2d VNMC BATTALION ATTACK ON
HOI DONG SAM 25 NOV 1963
Rice Paddies
Huts
Streams
57mm Recoilless Rifle
.50 Caliber Machine Guns
60mm Mortars
SCALE IN METERS
0
250
500

Once the entire battalion was on the ground, the assault company, augmented by a pair of 60mm mortars and two 57mm recoilless rifles, provided a base of fire to protect the movement of its sister companies. Captain Yen maneuvered his three remaining rifle companies and a battalion command group north to a position from which they could launch an envelopment on the fortified village. Using a treeline which bordered an irrigation canal as cover, the force hooked westward until it was directly north of the Viet Cong position. Meanwhile, a FARM GATE twin-engine B–26 relieved the UH–1B gunships on station. At this point in the action the Air Force FAC observed a group of 30–40 enemy attempting to flee from the northwest corner of Hoi Dong Sam. After clearing the target with the Marine battalion, he directed the B–26 to attack the target with its 250-pound bombs. The aircraft made several bombing passes and dispersed the Viet Cong. When the air strike ended the enveloping force began its assault against the northern edge of the village with two companies abreast and one following in reserve several hundred meters to the rear. Once the assault force was in motion the base of fire displaced forward, firing as they moved, to a small canal about 120 meters in front of the .50 caliber positions in the treeline. The two assault companies, followed closely by Yen, Smith, and the battalion command group, penetrated the northern end of the village and swept through to its southern periphery. The commander of the company on the east (or left) flank, deployed elements into the treeline where the Viet Cong automatic weapons had been active. Following a sharp but brief exchange of gunfire, the Marines cleared the position. They found eight enemy dead and three .50 caliber machine guns.

By noon the 2d Battalion had secured the entire village. Captain Yen ordered his assault companies to establish a perimeter defense and the reserve company to begin a systematic search of the position. His Marines uncovered a number of well-camouflaged bunkers and fighting positions. In a small canal just east of the village the Marines found the mount for another heavy caliber automatic weapon. They also discovered eight Viet Cong suspects and detained them for questioning. One rifle company moved to investigate the area where the B–26 had attacked the fleeing enemy earlier in the morning but found no evidence of additional casualties. Following the capture of Hoi Dong Sam, Yen's battalion conducted patrols for several days in search of the Viet Cong force that had attacked the Hiep Hoa Special Forces camp on the 25th. The enemy force, however, eluded the Marines by gaining refuge in Cambodia. The battalion returned to garrison at Thu Duc on 28 November.

In many ways the results of DAI–PHONG 30 pointed up the problems which frequently frustrated GVN military forces and their American advisors. The 2d Battalion had seized its objective and in so doing had killed a handful of Viet Cong and detained a number of suspects. The Marines had captured three heavy caliber automatic weapons and an assortment of small arms—all without suffering a single casualty of their own. Still, it was difficult to translate the action into victory. The Marines, along with the other government forces involved in the operation, had failed to intercept the Viet Cong raiding force in its flight toward the international boundary. Moreover, most of the occupants of Hoi Dong Sam had made good their escape despite the presence of observation and attack aircraft. Like many other government military operations undertaken during the 1961–1964 period, DAI–PHONG 30 was successful from a statistical standpoint but did little to wrest the tactical initiative from the guerrillas.

In the first week of December, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff ordered VNMC units to conduct an extended search in the jungles of western Tay Ninh Province in III Corps. A special Marine Task Force composed of the 1st and 3d Battalions was helilifted into the area on 3 December to begin Operation DAI–PHONG 31. This operation was punctuated by two major engagements and frequent enemy harassment. In one particularly vicious clash, the Vietnamese Marines incurred heavy casualties while attempting to fight out of a skillfully executed Viet Cong ambush. When the operation concluded on 9 December, the Vietnamese Marines had suffered 11 men killed, 58 wounded, and 1 captured. Nine Viet Cong bodies were found and another Communist soldier was captured. The enemy left four individual weapons on the battlefield.

In mid-December, South Vietnam's new leaders removed Lieutenant Colonel Khang from his position as Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine

Corps. Although he had not participated in the November coup, Khang had been a political appointee of President Diem and as such was viewed as a potential threat to the new regime. After being promoted to colonel, he was assigned to the Philippines as the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces Attache. Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien, who had been serving as Assistant Commandant and Chief of Staff of the VNMC, was appointed as Khang's successor. He assumed command of the Vietnamese Marine Corps on 16 December.

Vietnamese Marine Brigade units continued operations against the Viet Cong following Khang's relief but fought no major engagements. Near the end of December, with the nation drifting into political uncertainty and its own top leadership changed, the morale of the Vietnamese Marine Corps plummeted. Lieutenant Colonel Noren saw this unfortunate trend as a by-product of the general political instability which was beginning to grip the country rather than a reflection of Lien's leadership. Indeed, Noren thought the new VNMC commandant to be an extraordinarily capable officer.[4] In any case, as 1963 ended the U.S. Marine advisors were reporting climbing desertion rates in almost every battalion.

Accomplishments

Even though 1963 closed upon a discouraging note, the Marine Advisory Division could report positively on its own activities. At the urging of the Senior Marine Advisor, the Vietnamese Marine Corps had reinstituted multi-battalion combat operations. Steps had also been taken to cut the VNMC's last formal ties to the ARVN by creating a separate Marine Corps recruit training facility. When activated this training center was expected to provide VNMC battalions with a stream of enlisted men who would possess a background of higher quality basic training.

As for personal achievements, the U.S. Marine advisors had accompanied their units in every combat operation during 1963 except the November coup. No advisors had been killed in the 12-month period and only four (two of whom were on temporary assignment from the 3d Marine Division) had been wounded. The first combat decorations other than Purple Heart Medals for wounds were also approved and awarded to the advisors during the year. On 13 December, Captains Don Christensen and Frank Zimolzak, former advisors to the 4th and 3d Battalions respectively, were awarded the Bronze Star Medals with the Combat "V" for meritorious service. Captain Richard Taylor, an advisor with the 2d Battalion, earned the first Silver Star Medal during the same period for "conspicuous gallantry" between November 1962 and October 1963. Captain Joseph N. Smith, advisor to the 2d and 4th VNMC Battalions, earned the second Silver Star for gallantry displayed between October 1963 and April 1964.*

*Both Silver Star Medals were awarded during 1964.

CHAPTER 9

SHUFLY Operations

Development of the Compound Continues—Combat Support Operations—The Situation in Vietnam

SHUFLY, the only U.S. Marine tactical command assigned to South Vietnam, continued its combat support operations in the semi-isolated northern provinces throughout 1963. Although the size of I Corps had been reduced in late 1962 when the Vietnamese Joint General Staff shifted Quang Ngai Province to II CTZ, the mission of the Marine task element remained essentially unchanged. As the new year opened Lieutenant Colonel McCully's command was still responsible for providing direct helicopter support to the forces of the five northern provinces. Likewise, the government's order of battle in the northern provinces had not changed to any great degree. The 1st ARVN Division still occupied the coastal plains south of the DMZ in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Headquartered at Da Nang, the 2d ARVN Division continued to carry the main burden of operations against the Viet Cong in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. Operating in Quang Ngai Province to the south of the new I Corps-II Corps border were elements of the 25th ARVN Division. Interspersed along the coastal lowlands among the various regular battalions of these three divisions were small paramilitary garrisons. In the mountains to the west, the scattered Special Forces outposts with their Montagnard defenders continued their struggle for survival while monitoring Communist infiltration.

Development of the Compound Continues

The first month of 1963 saw three important changes in the composition and leadership of Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6. On 11 January, HMM–162, a UH–34D squadron commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Reinhardt Leu, replaced Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun's HMM–163 as the task element's helicopter unit. Five days later, on the 16th, Lieutenant Colonel George H. Linnemeier, winner of four Distinguished Flying Crosses during World War II and Korea, relieved Lieutenant Colonel Davis as the MABS–16 sub unit commander. In the last week of January Lieutenant Colonel Harold F. Brown, a veteran aviator who had piloted scout-dive bombers during the Second World War, arrived at Da Nang and assumed command of the task element from Lieutenant Colonel McCully.

During McCully's tour as the Commander, Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6, the Marine compound at Da Nang had begun to assume a quality of permanency which had never been evident at Soc Trang. The utilities section of the MABS–16 detachment was responsible for many of the more noticeable improvements. By the first of the new year they had constructed several shelters on the west side of the runway to cover the motor transport section's working area. They also had replaced the electrical system and repaired some of the damaged plumbing in the living areas. The task element's special services section had begun to provide the Da Nang Marines with entertainment by showing nightly movies, arranging fishing trips into Da Nang harbor, and issuing athletic equipment.

The monsoon season, which was characterized by cold rains, high winds, and deep mud, proved to be a source of much irritation to the Marines during the winter of 1962–1963. In addition to slowing flight operations and creating almost constant discomfort, the weather caused some unforeseen complications. In October 1962, heavy rainfall had combined with constant vehicle usage to turn the road between the living area and the

flight line into a quagmire that was virtually impassable. At the time, Colonel Ireland, then the task unit commander, had responded by requesting equipment from Okinawa to improve the Marines' only road link with their aircraft. Wing authorities promptly complied and a road grader was flown in by KC–130 (the new designation for the GV–1 Hercules). Within days a 700-foot section of the road was opened and a drainage ditch dug along its entire length.

This measure proved to be only temporary, however, for in January the mud again threatened to cut the Marine vehicles off from the east side of the airfield. Lieutenant Colonel McCully obtained a bulldozer from Okinawa to make more permanent repairs. With the help of this piece of equipment, the Marines constructed a new 400-foot section of road on an eight-inch rock base. These repairs proved to be satisfactory and the road caused no further problem during the remainder of the monsoon season.

Improvements in the compound continued to be made under the task element's new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Brown. In April action was taken on an earlier request for the assignment of a security detachment to guard the Marine area. A reconnaissance platoon of 47 Marines from the 3d Marine Division joined the task element, thus freeing the men of the helicopter squadron and the MABS–16 sub unit of the important secondary responsibility they had held since the task unit's deployment to Soc Trang. The assignment of the ground Marines was timely in that it corresponded with a reduction by the ARVN of its forces guarding the perimeter of the Da Nang airbase. One Marine general later observed that with the arrival of the infantry unit, "the air-ground team was in being in Vietnam." [1]

Other less obvious changes that contributed to the overall efficiency of the Marine task element also occurred during the early spring. In April, the task element commander was able to assign a better facility to medical and dental services. They had been crowded into one of the small structures along with other offices since the displacement from Soc Trang, but now were moved into a separate building in the living compound.

Another problem that plagued the Marines during their entire first year at Da Nang—inadequate water supply—was finally solved in late 1963. Originally the task unit had depended on a shallow well from which water was pumped and purified. The Marines nearly exhausted this source shortly after their arrival at Da Nang late in the dry season and their commanders were forced to impose strict water discipline. The monsoon rains eased the water crisis but by January production again dropped, this time as a result of the accumulation of heavy silt in the pumps. A Vietnamese contractor was engaged to clean and repair the pumping system but the problem soon recurred. In the early spring two new shallow wells were dug, one in the motor transport working area and the other in the living compound. With the onset of the dry season, however, the Marines again were forced to conserve water. This time the shortage became so acute that tank trucks were required to haul some 16,000 gallons of water a day from a nearby Air Force installation. Finally, in November, a detachment from a Navy construction battalion completed a well 450 feet deep and capped it with a high pressure pump. This proved to be the permanent solution to the long-standing water shortage.

Over the course of the year the Marines received several new vehicles which helped relieve the burden on the rebuilt buses which were beginning to falter under heavy use. Four 10-passenger, four-wheel-drive trucks and two M-442 "Mighty Mite" jeeps were flown in by KC–130s from Okinawa and assigned to the task element's motor transport section. By summer, two of the old buses were replaced with tactical passenger vehicles which were better suited for transporting personnel between the barracks and work areas. The addition of the new vehicles also allowed the mess hall to begin transporting hot noon meals to the men working on the east side of the airstrip. A mess line set up in the hangar area fed those Marines who previously had lost time by travelling to the living compound for noon meals.

Two changes were made in the task element's command structure in midyear. On 5 July Lieutenant Colonel Earl W. Cassidy, a veteran aviator with 20 years service, relieved Lieutenant Colonel Linnemeier as commanding officer of the MABS–16 sub unit. Two weeks later, on the 18th, Colonel Andre D. Gomez, a Marine who had distinguished himself as an artillery officer during World War II

before becoming a pilot, assumed command of Marine Task Element 79.3.3.6.

In summary, the improvements made in the task element's compound during the course of 1963 helped insure the successful support of sustained combat helicopter operations. Although overshadowed by the publicity which the actual flight operations attracted, the continued improvement of the Da Nang base was vital to the overall effectiveness of the Marine combat support effort.

Combat Support Operations

Marine helicopter support for government forces in I Corps encountered a brief interruption shortly after the new year began when HMM–163 was replaced by a fresh UH–34D squadron. Marine KC–130s shuttled between Okinawa and Da Nang for several days during the second week of January bringing the officers and men of HMM–162 to Vietnam and returning with members of HMM–163. The change-over of units was completed on 11 January when Lieutenant Colonel Rathbun officially transferred his squadron's aircraft and maintenance equipment to the newly-arrived unit.

In the five months and ten days since they initiated operations at Soc Trang, "Rathbun's Ridge Runners" had amassed an enviable combat record. The squadron's crews had flown a total of 10,869 hours, 15,200 sorties, and had lifted over 25,216 combat assault troops and 59,024 other passengers. In one month alone (August) they had established a Marine Corps record for medium helicopter squadrons by flying 2,543 helicopter hours. These records had not been set without risks, however. During the course of their operations in the Mekong Delta and in I Corps, helicopters operated by HMM–163's crews had been hit on 32 occasions by Communist small arms fire.[2] Moreover, the squadron had become the first Marine unit to suffer combat casualties in the Vietnam conflict.

HMM–162, led by Lieutenant Colonel Reinhardt Leu, the veteran Marine aviator who had commanded the squadron during the recent deployment to Thailand as part of the 3d MEU, began full-fledged combat support operations the same day that the last of Rathbun's squadron departed Da Nang. HMM–162's crews, many of whom had participated in similar operations around Udorn the previous summer, limited their early flights to routine resupply missions and a few medical evacuations. Such missions enabled the squadron's personnel to become better acquainted with the terrain over which they would operate during the next six months.

The new squadron participated in its first major combat troop lift on January 19, when a break in the monsoon allowed the 2d ARVN Division to execute a heliborne operation into the mountains about 15 miles west of Da Nang. Eighteen Marine UH–34Ds lifted 300 ARVN troops into three separate landing zones near a suspected Communist base area. The squadron's pilots and crews encountered their first Viet Cong opposition during this troop lift. Upright bamboo stakes obstructed one of the landing zones while at another the enemy fired at the Marine aircraft with small arms. Although two UH–34Ds were hit, none were shot down and the mission was completed successfully.

A month later, on 18 February, the Marine pilots experienced another of the hazards associated with flight operations in Vietnam while attempting to land troops from the 1st ARVN Division in a clearing about 18 miles southwest of Hue. Five helicopters sustained punctures in the bottoms of their fuselages when they accidentally landed on tree stumps concealed by high grass in the landing zone. One stump caused extensive damage to an aircraft when it ripped into its forward fuel cell. The crew was forced to leave the UH–34D in the field under ARVN protection overnight. The next morning Marine mechanics were flown in from Da Nang to repair the helicopter.

Despite several troop lifts involving a dozen or more aircraft, heliborne assault missions did not dominate HMM–162's operations during the unit's first three months in South Vietnam. Poor weather conditions over the northern provinces continued to restrict flight operations generally to resupply and medical evacuation missions. Statistics for the first quarter of 1963, for example, indicated that Marine helicopters conducted 6,537 logistics sorties as opposed to 1,181 tactical support sorties.

The single most significant incident during HMM–162's initial three months in Vietnam took place in the second week of March when the squadron suffered its first aircraft losses and casu-

alties. These were incurred during a salvage-rescue attempt in the mountains of northern II Corps. The incident began on 10 March as two Marine UH–34Ds attempted to insert a four-man American-Vietnamese ground rescue team into the jungle about 30 miles southwest of Quang Ngai. The team's assignment was to locate a U.S. Army OV–1 Mohawk (a twin-engine, turboprop, electronic reconnaissance aircraft manufactured by Grumman) which had crashed, and its pilot, who had parachuted into the jungle. The exact site of the accident had not been located but the general area was known to be a steep jungle-covered mountain, the elevation of which approached 5,000 feet. While attempting to lower search personnel into the jungle by means of a hoist, one of the helicopters lost power and crashed. The ARVN ranger who was on the hoist when the accident occurred was killed but the helicopter's crew managed to climb from the wreckage shortly before it erupted in flames. The copilot, Captain David N. Webster, was severly burned in the explosion.

Other Marine UH–34Ds from Da Nang joined in the rescue operation, refueling from the TAFDS at Quang Ngai for the flight into the mountains. The situation was complicated further when a second Marine helicopter experienced a power loss and crashed near the burned-out UH–34D hulk while attempting to land a rescue team composed of MABS–16 Marines. Fortunately, the aircraft did not burn and the only injury incurred in the crash was a sprained ankle, but the extremely steep and densely jungled terrain kept the Marines from reaching the site of the other downed helicopter. Bad weather and darkness prevented further efforts to extricate the various American and South Vietnamese personnel from the jungle that day. During the night Captain Webster died of injuries.

The next day, the Marines stripped a UH–34D of some 700 pounds of equipment so as to enable it to operate more efficiently at the extreme elevations in the vicinity of the crash sites. After carefully maneuvering the helicopter into a hovering position, the pilot was able to extract the survivors and the dead copilot from the site where the first UH–34D had crashed and burned. The survivors were flown to Quang Ngai. There the wounded were treated and later evacuated by U.S. Air Force transport to an American hospital at Nha Trang.

While these events were taking place, the Marines from the second downed helicopter, guided by search aircraft operating over the area, located and recovered the injured Army Mohawk pilot. This accomplished, the Marines hacked out a small clearing from which they were evacuated by another Marine helicopter.

The episode was not yet over, however, as the crashed OV–1 and its payload of advanced electronics equipment still had not been secured. Finally, an ARVN ranger company, which had joined the search, reached the remnants of the Mohawk and established security around the site while U.S. Army technicians were helilifted in to examine the debris. The Marine UH–34D, which had crashed nearby without burning and was damaged beyond repair, was cannibalized for usable parts and then destroyed.

On 13 March, with the search and rescue tasks completed, Marine helicopters began shuttling South Vietnamese rangers to Mang Buc, a nearby government outpost. During this phase of the mission the helicopters received fire from Viet Cong who had moved into positions near the rangers' perimeter. Three UH–34Ds delivered suppressive fire on the enemy with their door-mounted M–60 machine guns while the remaining helicopters picked up the troops in the landing zone. This was the first recorded instance of a Marine helicopter providing close air support in actual combat.

Other developments occurred in the early months of 1963 which either directly or indirectly affected the conduct of Marine helicopter operations. One was the improved coordination of intelligence gathering and usage among all South Vietnamese and American agencies within I Corps. This effort, which was essentially a concerted drive to streamline the collection and flow of intelligence information, was stimulated by a series of corps-wide intelligence seminars, the first of which was held in early February. Of special interest to the Marine aviators was the establishment of closer liaison between the Marine task element, U.S. Army Special Forces, and South Vietnamese units in the northern corps tactical zone.

Closely related to the improvement of the overall intelligence situation was the acquisition of some new equipment by the SHUFLY Marines. In March the task element received two new model hand-held aerial cameras for use by the

crews of the O–1B observation aircraft. Later in the month a photo lab was completed to facilitate the rapid processing of the photographs. By the end of the month the Marines were also being provided with high altitude photographic coverage of some objective areas taken by U.S. Air Force reconnaissance jets.

The tempo of Marine helicopter operations began to quicken in early April with the advent of sustained periods of clear weather. On 13 April, HMM–162 participated in a major heliborne assault in which 435 2d ARVN Division troops were lifted into a suspected Communist stronghold in the mountains along the Song Thu Bon, about 30 miles south of Da Nang. As in most troop lift missions, the Marine O–1Bs provided reconnaissance and radio relay support. For the first time in the war Marine transport helicopters were escorted by helicopter gunships, the UH–1B Iroquois (a single-engine, turbine-powered utility helicopter built by the Bell Helicopter Company). Five UH–1Bs from a detachment of the Army's Da Nang-based 68th Aviation Company, armed with M–60 machine gun clusters and 2.75-inch rockets, joined the VNAF fighter bombers to conduct preparatory airstrikes on the landing zones.

The initial landing met no enemy resistance but later in the day action in the operational area intensified. A Marine UH–34D was hit by eight rounds of enemy small arms fire while attempting to evacuate wounded South Vietnamese soldiers and U.S. Army advisors from a landing zone near the point where the ARVN forces had been landed that morning. With the co-pilot, First Lieutenant John D. Olmen, wounded, the badly damaged aircraft force landed in the Vietnamese position.

Two other Marine helicopters were dispatched to the scene to pick up the Marine crew and complete the evacuation. They managed to evacuate Lieutenant Olmen, a wounded American advisor, and one dead and four wounded ARVN soldiers without incident. On a return trip to pick up more wounded, however, one of the two UH–34Ds suffered heavy damage from Viet Cong fire. In this incident the crew chief, Corporal Charley M. Campbell, was wounded in the thigh, chest, and back by small arms fire, and the aircraft was forced to land near the first downed helicopter. The accompanying UH–34D landed, picked up Campbell, and returned him to Da Nang for emergency treatment. Repair teams were helilifted to the position on the afternoon of the 13th, and began repairing both helicopters. One was able to return to Da Nang later that day but the other required extensive repairs and could not be flown to safety until the 15th.

While HMM–162 repair crews were working feverishly to extricate their aircraft from the predicament along the banks of the Song Thu Bon, another of their helicopters was shot down nearby while supporting the same operation. This aircraft was hit four times while approaching an ARVN landing zone located in a small valley about three miles south of the action in which the two helicopters had been lost earlier. After temporary repairs were made, its crew flew the damaged UH–34D to Da Nang where more detailed repair work was accomplished.

The number of combat support sorties flown into the mountains by HMM–162's crews rose steadily as the weather improved. Near the end of April, the Marines helilifted three battalions of the 1st ARVN Division into the mountains of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces near the Laotian border. These units were to participate in an extended multi-regiment drive against suspected Communist infiltration routes there. This operation, for which Lieutenant Colonel Leu's squadron provided daily support after the initial landing, taxed the durability of both the Marine crews and their aircraft. For 90 days task element helicopters flew into and out of hazardous landing zones located at elevations as high as 4,500 feet. The majority of these sorties were resupply and medical evacuation missions with the occasional exception being the heliborne displacement of infantry and artillery units when distance or terrain prohibited overland movement. Despite the dangers inherent in helicopter operations conducted over mountainous terrain, the squadron incurred no aircraft or personnel losses while supporting the offensive in western Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.

While his squadron's support of the 1st ARVN Division's on-going drive near the Laotian border continued, Lieutenant Colonel Leu committed 21 UH–34Ds to support the offensive against the Do Xa base area along the southern edge of I Corps. On 27 April, Marine crews helilifted over 567 troops of the 2d ARVN Division into the

mountainous area roughly 22 miles southwest of Tam Ky to begin Operation BACH PHUONG XI. The squadron was less fortunate during this operation than it was during the lengthy Quang Tri effort. One helicopter was shot down by Viet Cong fire which wounded the pilot, Captain Virgil R. Hughes, in the leg. The crew and the embarked ARVN soldiers escaped further injury when the aircraft made a crash landing in which it suffered extensive damage. After the crew was rescued, a salvage team from Da Nang stripped the helicopter of all usable parts and burned the hulk so the Viet Cong could not make use it. This was the first Marine helicopter loss definitely attributed to direct enemy action.[3]

Following the initial heliborne assaults into the Do Xa area, two UH–34Ds were rotated to Tra My from Da Nang on a daily basis. Refueling from the TAFDS bladder, these standby aircraft were used primarily to perform medical evacuation missions for VNMC and ARVN units involved in BACH PHOUNG XI. Before the operation ended in mid-May, HMM–162's crews had evacuated nearly 100 Marine and ARVN casualties from hazardous landing zones scattered along the border of I and II Corps. The task element's 0–1Bs also provided aerial reconnaissance support for all phases of the operation. On 19 May, the day before BACH PHOUNG XI terminated, 12 Marine UH–34Ds lifted the two Vietnamese Marine battalions to the provisional brigade command post at Tra My. This particular phase of the operation evoked favorable comment from an anonymous U.S. Marine pilot who noted on an unsigned debriefing form that the heliborne withdrawal had gone smoothly and that the Vietnamese Marines appeared "well organized in the landing zones and at Tra My." [4] BACH PHOUNG XI ended unceremoniously the following day when HMM–162 helilifted the ARVN battalions from the Do Xa base area.

One trend which became increasingly apparent as the spring of 1963 unfolded was the growing utilization of the Army UH–1B helicopter gunships as escorts to and from landing zones. The gunships accompanied all Marine assault helilifts and medical evacuations, and when available, also escorted resupply flights in order to provide suppressive fire around government positions while landings were in progress. Although well suited for the escort missions, the lightly armed UH–1Bs did not replace the Vietnamese Air Force attack aircraft as the principal source of preparatory air strikes around landing zones being used for assault helilifts. The Marines continued to rely on the more heavily armed VNAF T–28s and A–1Hs to conduct the so-called "prep strikes." *

May was the last full month of combat support operations for Lieutenant Colonel Leu's squadron. In the first week of June, transports from VMGR–152 began landing at Da Nang with the Marines of a new UH–34D squadron. Since assuming responsibility for helicopter support in I Corps in mid-January, HMM–162 had compiled a solid combat record. While under the squadron's operations, the UH–34D helicopters had flown 17,670 sorties for a total of 8,579 flight hours. The O–1Bs added approximately 400 sorties and another 1,000 hours to these figures. In the month of May alone HMM–162's helicopters flew over 2,000 flight hours—a number which approached the record set by HMM–163 during the previous summer in the Mekong Delta. Other statistics reflected the growing intensity of the Vietnam war. Since its deployment to Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Leu's unit had lost three helicopters—two as a result of operations at extreme elevations and one to enemy fire. One member of the unit had been killed and three others wounded since the squadron entered the combat zone.[5]

After a brief change-over period, the outgoing squadron commander officially turned over his unit's aircraft and maintenance equipment on 8 June to Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Shook, the commanding officer of HMM–261. Shook, who had flown Marine helicopters in combat during the Korean War, committed his crews to their first actual combat missions that same day.

A significant change took place in the coordinating arrangements that governed U.S. helicopter units supporting I Corps at approximately the same time that HMM-261 initiated combat support operations. Since its relocation at Da Nang, the Marine task element, along with all other aviation units in I CTZ, had received its missions from the

*As a result of the joint helicopter operations in I Corps, a vigorous debate developed within the Marine Corps concerning the value of armed helicopters. This debate and the subsequent development, procurement, and operations of Marine helicopter gunships will be covered in a separate historical monograph being prepared by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps.

Air Support Operations Center located within the corps headquarters. As the number of U.S. and VNAF aviation organizations assigned to I Corps grew and the total number of missions multiplied, it became necessary to modify the system of coordination and control. In accordance with a ComUSMACV directive, I Corps headquarters created an Aviation Headquarters Operations Center (AHOC) to oversee the employment of Marine and Army aircraft in the CTZ. The AHOC, which was composed of a senior Army representative, a senior Marine representative, and an operations section, was to be directed by the Commander, Task Element 79.3.3.6. Formally stated, its primary mission was to "plan, direct, and control the employment of all Army and Marine Corps Aviation Units and aircraft operations in direct support of I Corps." The newly organized AHOC was also ordered to "participate in, and provide assistance to operational planning and the coordination of employment of USA/USMC Aviation with VNAF/USAF tactical air." [6] The AHOC, therefore, was formed to supplement rather than replace the older Air Support Operations Center, which continued to direct and control all U.S. Air Force and VNAF operations over the northern provinces. It was under this arrangement that U.S. Marine and Army aviation units operated after mid-1963.

HMM-261's Marines began encountering systematic Viet Cong resistance to their operations shortly after their first combat missions in early June. A 21-aircraft assault mission into the mountains west of Da Nang was aborted on 6 July when the Marine pilots discovered that the Viet Cong had obstructed the two available landing zones with upright stakes. While inspecting one of the landing zones on a low pass, a helicopter was hit in the forward fuel cell by Communist small arms fire. The damage to the aircraft was not serious enough to force a landing, but the pilot of an escorting U.S. Army UH-1B was mortally wounded while attempting to suppress the ground fire.

Ten days after the enemy forced the cancellation of the assault mission west of Da Nang, HMM-261 suffered its first aircraft loss in Vietnam. The crash, which was later attributed to mechanical failure, occurred about 37 miles southwest of Da Nang while one of the squadron's helicopters was on a routine logistics mission. Six passengers, two American advisors and four ARVN soldiers, were injured in the accident. The squadron commander dispatched two other UH-34Ds to the scene of the crash to evacuate the wounded and insert a salvage team. The badly damaged aircraft was assessed as beyond repair and was destroyed.

In the second week of August, officers from HMM-261 and the task element's staff (under the command of Colonel Gomez) met with American and Vietnamese officers at I Corps headquarters to plan a large-scale heliborne retrograde movement. The planned helilift was to mark the culmination of Operation LAM SON XII, a three-week long offensive by several battalions of the 2d ARVN Division against Communist infiltration routes in Quang Nam Province along the Laotian border. Although not encircled, the ARVN battalions had encountered increasing Viet Cong pressure since early August. I Corps authorities feared that unless their units were withdrawn promptly they might be cut off from the few landing zones that existed in the rugged operations area.

As planned, the retrograde operation involved helilifting some 1,300 troops with their artillery and equipment to Thuong Duc, a government-held town situated 30 miles southwest of Da Nang along the Song Vu Gia. The operation plan called for the commitment of 20 Marine helicopters, 18 of which would participate in the actual troop lifts. The two extra UH-34Ds would be used in the event it became necessary either to replace helicopters assigned to the troop lift or to conduct search and rescue operations for downed aircraft. Three VNAF UH-34s and two U.S. Army unarmed UH-1Bs were designated by the I Corps headquarters to assist HMM-261 with the helilift.

The Da Nang Air Support Operations Center assigned a variety of other aircraft to support the operation. These included two VNAF T-28s, one FARM GATE B-26, and two U.S. Army UH-1B gunships. These aircraft would share the task of providing close air support for the troop lift. A Marine O-1B was scheduled to perform weather reconnaissance missions.

The entire air operation was to be coordinated from two aircraft. An American forward air controller in a VNAF observation plane was to direct all air strikes while overall control for the multiservice, bilingual effort was to come from a U.S.

Air Force U–10 Super Courier. This six-man, single engine aircraft, which possessed an eight hour fuel capacity and carried three radios, would serve as an airborne air support operations center (Airborne ASOC). It would be flown by an Air Force pilot and would carry a Marine officer from the task element along with U.S. and Vietnamese representatives from the Da Nang ASOC. These officers would be in continuous radio contact with all aircraft in the operations area, and also with the U.S. Air Force liaison officer to I Corps who would be positioned with the ground troops.

The concept of the operation called for the ARVN units to be lifted from two hazardous landing zones over a three-day period. According to the plan 500 ARVN soldiers were to be removed from Landing Zone HOTEL on Thursday, 15 August. Landing Zone HOTEL, a small clearing which could accommodate only three UH–34Ds, was situated along a river and was crowded between two 1,000-foot-high ridgelines only five miles from the Laotian border. The steep, jungle-covered ridges generally paralleled each other less than 400 meters apart on either side of the landing zone. Slightly west of the small clearing the ridges joined to form a box canyon. The physical structure of the location dictated that the transport helicopters use the same approach and retirement routes.

Due largely to the proximity of the high terrain which surrounded Landing Zone HOTEL, the ARVN adopted a Marine proposal to leave a 125-man security force on the two ridges. This force would provide cover for the helicopters conducting the final troop lift during this first phase of the retrograde movement. The 125 South Vietnamese soldiers would move cross-country to another landing zone to be picked up by helicopters following the completion of the helilift from Landing Zone HOTEL.

The second landing zone, codename ZULU, was nearly as treacherous as the first. ZULU was completely encircled by a rim of hills some 500 feet higher than the floor of the landing site. In addition to the 125-man security force from HOTEL, the Marine, Army, and VNAF helicopters were scheduled to lift 200 ARVN troops and two 105mm howitzers from this landing zone on 16 and 17 August (the second and third days of the operation).

An unexpected complication developed the morning the operation began when the Air Force grounded its B–26s after one of the attack bombers crashed elsewhere in the northern portion of Vietnam as a result of undetermined causes. Shortly after this crash, HMM–261 was called upon to divert a flight of helicopters to assist in search and rescue operations for the downed B–26, thus reducing even further the assets available to support the heliborne retrograde.

Despite the loss of some of the air power assigned to the operation, I Corps authorities elected to proceed with the helilift from Landing Zone HOTEL as planned. After the crew of a Marine 0–1B confirmed that good weather prevailed over the operations area, the first helicopters departed Da Nang on schedule. Less than half an hour after take off the Marine and Vietnamese pilots began maneuvering their aircraft between the two ridges which dominated Landing Zone HOTEL. Twice during the pickup the armed UH–1B escorts drew fire from the thick jungle on one side of the approach lanes being used by the transports. Both times they returned fire in the direction of the unseen enemy and forced him to silence his weapons. The first phase of the operation was completed without serious incident four hours after it had begun.

The second phase of the helilift began the next morning with the two unarmed U.S. Army UH–1Bs making several trips to Landing Zone ZULU to lift out the disassembled ARVN 105mm howitzers. The Marine and VNAF transport helicopters followed and continued to shuttle troops out of the landing zone for three hours without encountering enemy opposition. Then a departing flight of UH–34Ds drew fire from a nearby ridgeline. One of the escorting UH–1Bs immediately marked the suspected target for the VNAF T–28s and the attack aircraft bombed and strafed the position. The Communist activity ceased.

After an overnight march, the covering force from Landing Zone HOTEL arrived at Landing Zone ZULU. Although they were not scheduled to be removed from the field until the next day, the schedule was adjusted and the 125 weary ARVN soldiers were flown to the secure assembly area on the afternoon of their arrival. This modification reduced the amount of work which would be required of the helicopters on the final day of the operation.

The next phase of the helilift from ZULU on 17 August was characterized by increasing concern for security around the landing site. The general scheme for protecting the helicopters during this critical stage of the exercise was to establish two perimeters, one around the rim of high ground which surrounded the zone and another around the immediate landing site. The outer perimeter would be withdrawn first, leaving the inside ring of troops to deny the enemy direct access to the landing zone while the force from the outer perimeter boarded the helicopters. Once the Vietnamese soldiers were withdrawn from the rim of hills, the area within 300 meters of the close-in defenses would be automatically cleared for air strikes. Even with these precautions the helicopters would be extremely vulnerable to any enemy force that might rapidly occupy the high ground above Landing Zone ZULU following the withdrawal of the outer perimeter. Accordingly, once the troops from the outer defenses were staged for the helilift, the transport helicopters would be directed by the airborne ASOC to tighten the landing interval between aircraft from the usual five minutes to as short a time span as possible. By landing in such rapid succession, the dangerous final stage of the operation could be accomplished more quickly.

Two hours after the helilift began on Saturday morning, the air liaison officer at ZULU reported that the outer perimeter had been withdrawn and that all remaining Vietnamese troops were in positions around the landing zone. At this point the operation, now in its most critical phase, began to experience agonizing delays. First, a loaded helicopter arrived at the assembly area with a rough running engine. Fearing that the fuel in the TAFDS had somehow become contaminated, Lieutenant Colonel Shook instructed all HMM–261 pilots to check their aircraft's fuel strainers while their passengers disembarked at the assembly point. No evidence was found to indicate that the fuel contained contaminants, but the operation was slowed at the exact point where the intensified helilift was to have begun. Another minor delay occurred after a helicopter flying near the landing zone reported having drawn enemy ground fire. The approach and departure routes were adjusted slightly so that the transport helicopters would not fly over the area and VNAF T–28s were directed to attack the suspected enemy position. Shortly after the air strike ended the air liaison officer at the landing zone reported more enemy activity only 500 meters from his position. This momentary crisis was resolved when the American air liaison officer personally directed armed UH–1Bs to neutralize the target area.

Finally, the airborne ASOC passed instructions to proceed with the operation, whereupon HMM–261 and VNAF helicopters began spiraling down into the landing zone. The escorting UH–1B gunships provided continuous protection for the transport helicopters by flying concentric but opposite patterns around them. One after another the transports landed, took on troops, climbed out of the landing zone, and turned toward Thuong Duc. Less than five minutes after the stepped-up helilift began, the last troops were airborne. The crew chief of the helicopter which embarked the final ARVN heliteam then dropped a purple smoke grenade into the empty landing zone to signal all other aircraft that the lift was complete.

The three-day heliborne retrograde from the Laotian border proved to be one of the most efficient helicopter operations conducted by the Marines in the Republic of Vietnam during the early 1960s. Its success was due largely to detailed planning, particularly the South Vietnamese plans for the ground defense of both landing zones. These plans and their subsequent execution led a grateful Colonel Gomez, the task element commander, to declare: "This was the first time in our experience that a helicopter-borne withdrawal had been treated as a retrograde operation rather than an administrative lift. Without a sound retrograde plan the operation might well have failed."[7]

Although this observation was correct, it should be added that the close coordination between the airborne ASOC, the operational aircraft, and the air liaison officer on the ground had contributed to the successful execution of the plans. These agencies were instrumental in coordinating the bilingual, multiservice effort, particularly when it was beset with difficulties in its critical final stage.

HMM–261's combat support missions continued at a normal rate following the completion of the mid-August retrograde helilift. A month later, on 16 September, Lieutenant Colonel Shook's squadron lost its second UH–34D in a crash 25 miles west-southwest of Hue. The helicopter, which had

developed mechanical problems while carrying troops of a South Vietnamese assault force, was damaged beyond repair. Its crew members and passengers fortunately escaped injury. The aircraft was stripped of usable parts by a salvage team from Da Nang and burned.

Shortly after this incident, the first elements of a new squadron began arriving at Da Nang and HMM–261 turned to preparations for its departure. Since early June, when it had become the fourth Marine helicopter squadron assigned to SHUFLY, Lieutenant Colonel Shook's unit had accumulated 5,288 combat flying hours and 11,406 sorties in the UH–34Ds alone. The squadron's crews had helilifted over 6,000 troops, nearly 1,900,000 pounds of cargo, and had accomplished over 600 medical evacuation missions.[8]

The new squadron, HMM–361, assumed responsibility for helicopter support in I Corps on 2 October after a short period of orientation flying with the crews of the departing unit. HMM–361's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Ross, was well qualified to direct a tactical aviation unit in a combat situation. Decorated with five Distinguished Flying Crosses during World War II and Korea, he was a recent graduate of the Air Force Command and Staff College.

Barely a week after Ross' squadron initiated combat support operations at Da Nang, it suffered its first aircraft and personnel losses. The incident occurred on 8 October when two UH–34Ds crashed almost simultaneously while on a search and rescue mission 38 miles southwest of Da Nang. Both helicopters burned, killing 10 men; the pilots, copilots, the squadron's flight surgeon, and five crewmen. A search of the area was initiated immediately for the downed aircraft, but darkness prevented their discovery until the next morning. By then the Viet Cong had surrounded both crash sites and were waiting to ambush the search and rescue helicopters which they knew would arrive. When the rescue aircraft attempted to land, they met determined enemy opposition. Colonel Gomez requested ARVN assistance and 254 South Vietnamese troops were lifted into nearby clearings with instructions to dislodge the enemy force from the area around the downed aircraft. While executing the landing, HMM–361 helicopters were hit nine times by small arms fire, but suffered only superficial damage. One ARVN soldier was killed.

The following day, as the South Vietnamese forces moved toward the downed UH–34Ds, three Marine helicopters escorted by three armed UH–1Bs and two VNAF T–28s lifted an inspection team into the crash site to recover the bodies and investigate the wreckage. Enemy automatic weapons fire broke out while the UH–34Ds waited in the landing zone and forced the pilots to take off while the inspection team found cover on the ground. After the Communist fire had been suppressed, the helicopters returned for the stranded Marines. Their investigation of the aircraft hulks had been fruitful: the evidence of enemy small arms fire in the wreckage and the relative positions of the two helicopters led Lieutenant Colonel Ross to conclude that the aircraft had been shot down by the Viet Cong.[9] But this was not a conclusive finding. There was room for speculation that the two helicopters had actually collided in midair while attempting to evade ground fire.

Ground action in the hills around the crash sites continued. On 11 October, another Marine helicopter was hit by Viet Cong fire while resupplying ARVN units in the area. In this incident the UH–34D was struck twice in the engine and once in the wheel strut while in a landing zone about two miles from the point where the crashes had occurred. After assessing the damage, a maintenance team from Da Nang determined that the helicopter would require a new engine. Marines from the security platoon were utilized to provide security until 13 October when an additional 120 ARVN troops were helilifted into the area and established a perimeter around the aircraft. Other helicopters then delivered the new engine and a maintenance crew to the landing zone. After the engines were exchanged, a crew returned the UH–34D to Da Nang.

By the time HMM–361 had removed the last ARVN troops from the hills around the scene of the tragic accidents, monsoon weather had begun to restrict flight operations. The remaining two weeks of October were characterized by a reduced number of missions, most of which were either resupply or medical evacuations. By the end of October, despite numerous flight cancellations, Lieutenant Colonel Ross' crews had gained the unenviable distinction of having attracted more enemy fire during a one month period than any previous squadron to serve with SHUFLY.

Their helicopters had been shot at on 46 different occasions and had been hit 18 times.[10]

SHUFLY's combat support operations came to a halt in the first days of November as the reverberations from Diem's overthrow spread to South Vietnam's northern provinces. American officials in Washington and Saigon, aware of the pitfalls that might accompany open support of either side in the power struggle, ordered all U.S. military forces to cease advisory and combat support activities. As a result of the sensitive political situation, no U.S. aircraft left the ground on 2 November. Two days after the new regime seized power in Saigon, the U.S. Marine helicopters were permitted to perform emergency medical evacuation and emergency resupply missions. Even these flights were to be approved beforehand by ARVN military officers in Saigon. Four days after Diem's overthrow, the new leaders in Saigon eased the political restrictions and SHUFLY's operations returned to near normal. One remaining limitation stipulated that U.S. helicopters could not transport ARVN units into population centers even though troops could be helilifted from the cities into rural areas.

Due to torrential monsoon rains which began striking the Da Nang area in mid-November, HMM-361's combat support operations continued at a relatively low level throughout the remainder of the year. This trend was confirmed by the flight totals compiled for the final two months of 1963. In November, the squadron's UH-34Ds flew only 145 sorties for 233 flight hours. December's statistics, 230 helicopter sorties for 338 flight hours, indicated a slight upswing but fell far short of the monthly figures achieved earlier in the year. With rain and fog frequently rendering the mountains inaccessible by air, the preponderance of the squadron's missions were conducted along the coastal plains. As 1963 ended SHUFLY's combat support operations were continuing at a greatly reduced rate.

The Situation in Vietnam

Although not yet desperate, the overall situation in South Vietnam at the end of 1963 was far from favorable. Mismanaged and poorly coordinated from the outset, the Strategic Hamlet Program had failed to fulfill even the most moderate of American and South Vietnamese expectations. Little discernable headway had been made toward restoring any large segment of the populated rural areas to government control. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese had disregarded the Geneva Agreement of 1962 and had continued to infiltrate troops and material down the Laotian corridor into the South. Although the 1963 figure of 4,200 confirmed infiltrators was roughly 1,000 men lower than the figure for the previous year, it was substantial enough to force the government to deviate more and more from its avowed strategy of clearing Viet Cong formations from the vital populated areas. To help meet this continuing influx of Communist regulars, the government had committed its ground force to operations against base areas located in the remote hinterlands with increasing frequency. More often than not these multi-battalion offensives, such as the VNMC-ARVN drive into the Do Xa base area in May, proved futile, usually resulting in scattered and inconsequential clashes with small groups of Viet Cong. The continuation of such actions, of course, worked to the advantage of the Communists as the government forces expended time, energy, and lives without exacting a commensurate price from the enemy.

Other disturbing trends had emerged on the South's battlefields during the course of the year. Following an action fought in the Mekong Delta during early January in which the Viet Cong soundly defeated a multi-battalion ARVN heliborne force, enemy main force units continued to maintain their integrity and fought back when confronted with helicopter assaults. This trend was evident even in the northern provinces where each successive assault by Marine helicopters appeared to meet more determined resistance. Aside from the Viet Cong's new-found confidence in countering heliborne offensives, another source of concern to U.S. and Vietnamese officials was the appearance in the South of several Viet Cong regimental headquarters during the year. The activation of these headquarters, which assumed control of already operational main force battalions, seemed to presage another phase of Communist military escalation.

The situation throughout South Vietnam worsened in the aftermath of the Diem coup. Subsequent to the widespread command changes ordered by the new government, the morale, and in turn the

ARVN troops fan out from an HMM-361 helicopter during an assault into the mountains of I Corps. (USMC Photo A420866).

effectiveness, of the Vietnamese armed forces declined sharply. The Viet Cong moved quickly to exploit the prevailing state of confusion by staging a rash of attacks in the weeks after Diem's overthrow—attacks which worked a profound influence on the already faltering Strategic Hamlet Program. "The fall of the Ngo regime," wrote one American scholar, "was accompanied by the complete collapse of the pacification efforts in many areas, and vast regions that had been under government control quickly came under the influence of the Viet Cong." [11] The nation's new leaders therefore formally terminated the badly damaged Strategic Hamlet Program. Although it was soon to be replaced with similar pacification campaigns, most Vietnamese and American officials conceded that much time and energy would be required to restore momentum to the government's efforts at securing the allegiance of the rural population. So, by the end of 1963 both the tempo and effectiveness of South Vietnam's overall war effort was at its lowest ebb since the intensification of the U.S. military assistance program in early 1962.

This threatening situation was hardly consistent with American military plans which were being implemented at year's end. Drawn up at Secretary of Defense McNamara's direction and approved by him in the late summer of 1963, these plans called for a phased withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. servicemen from Vietnam by January 1964. The phased withdrawal plan, whose ultimate objective was to end direct American participation in the war, envisioned a gradual scaling down of U.S. involvement while simultaneously turning over more military responsibility to the South Vietnamese. Included in the initial 1,000-man reduction

was the 47-man security platoon which had guarded the U.S. Marine task element's compound at Da Nang since April. For the Marines serving with the task element, 1963 thus ended on an incongruous note. While the Viet Cong threat appeared on the rise, their own defenses were being reduced. Clearly, events in Vietnam had overtaken long-range plans already in motion.

PART IV

AN EXPANDING GROUND WAR, 1964

CHAPTER 10

Marines Meet the Challenge

New American Decisions—A Restructured Military Assistance Command—Changes in Marine Leadership—Redesignation and Reorganization—The Vietnamese Marine Brigade—Additional Marine Activities

New American Decisions

Less than three weeks after the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. Presidency changed hands. On 22 November President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson took the reigns of the American government. By late November, when the new president assumed office, the process of political and military disintegration which had begun in South Vietnam following the Diem coup was already well underway. This process continued into the early weeks of 1964 when, in late January, General Nguyen Khanh, the newly appointed commander of I Corps, seized power in a bloodless coup. This second turnover in the government of South Vietnam in less than three months had its most serious impact on the nation's armed forces. A new series of command changes ensued and again the government's operations against the Communists suffered. As had been the case in the closing months of 1963, the Viet Cong continued to capitalize on the government's disarray by expanding its control into previously secure areas.

By March the rapidly declining effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military forces led the Johnson Administration to review the earlier decisions to withdraw American servicemen and to cut back the military assistance program. In a 16 March memorandum to President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara warned that "the [military] situation had unquestionably been growing worse" in South Vietnam.[1] To counteract this threatening trend, McNamara offered a broad set of recommendations which included a proposal to support a 50,000-man increase in the size of the Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces. The memorandum did not address the question of additional American advisors who might be needed to supervise the proposed expansion. In any case, President Johnson approved McNamara's plan the following day, thus setting the stage for increases in U.S. military assistance to South Vietnam.[2]

Shortly after his most recent decision on Vietnam, President Johnson ordered changes in his top civilian and military representatives in Saigon. On 22 June, General William C. Westmoreland, U.S. Army, who had been serving since January as Deputy Commander, USMACV, succeeded General Harkins as ComUSMACV. One day later, on the 23d, President Johnson announced that General Maxwell D. Taylor would replace Henry Cabot Lodge as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam. Taylor, who had been serving since 1962 as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had been closely associated with the Vietnam problem since his 1961 fact-finding mission. Both he and Westmoreland were thoroughly familiar with U.S. programs and objectives in Vietnam.

Soon after assuming his new responsibilities, General Westmoreland requested that the Joint Chiefs of Staff augment his command with 5,100 additional military personnel. In his opinion, these men were needed to support and supervise the expansion of the Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces. Secretary McNamara met with the Joint Chiefs on 20 July to discuss this request for 900 more advisors and 4,200 additional support personnel. All agreed that the deteriorating situation in Vietnam demanded the measure and recommended its approval. The proposal was forwarded to President Johnson who approved it in early August. Emphasizing the urgency of the military situation, McNamara then ordered the Joint Chiefs to complete the entire build-up

The MACV staff, spring 1964. Seated at head of table are General Paul D. Harkins, USA, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and his relief General William C. Westmoreland, USA. Major General Richard G. Weede, USMC, MACV Chief of Staff, is seated to General Westmoreland's immediate left, and Brigadier General Carl A. Youngdale, USMC, Assistant Chief of Staff, J–2, is seated two positions to General Weede's left. (Photo courtesy of Major General Carl A. Youngdale, USMC (Ret.)).

before 30 September. At this juncture, however, General Westmoreland pointed out that such a rapid influx of personnel would "overload existing facilities [in South Vietnam]" and stated his desire to see the build-up accomplished in a more orderly progression over a period of several months. After considering the general's latest request, the Secretary of Defense withdrew his earlier demand for an accelerated deployment.[3]

While the details of the expanded U S. advisory program were being hammered out in Washington, the focus of the administration's concern swung abruptly from the battlefields of South Vietnam to the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of North Vietnam. In two separate incidents during the first week of August, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked U.S. Navy ships operating in international waters.* An international crisis ensued when the United States retaliated with limited air strikes against North Vietnamese naval facilities. On 6 August, the U.S. Congress unanimously passed a joint resolution authorizing the President "to use all measures, including the commitment of armed forces to assist [South Vietnam] in the defense of its independence and territorial integrity . . . ." [4] President Johnson signed the so-called Tonkin Gulf Resolution five days after it was passed, and in so

*A vigorous debate has since developed concerning the actual origins of the Tonkin Gulf incidents. It has been claimed that the Americans precipitated the attacks by supporting aggressive South Vietnamese naval patrols off the North Vietnamese coast.

doing, reaffirmed his pledge of full support for the Government of Vietnam.*

While the tensions generated by the Tonkin Gulf incidents never really subsided, the immediate crisis soon passed. Thereafter the American attentions focused once again on South Vietnam where the political and military situation began to deteriorate at an unprecedented rate after midyear. Ironically, this process of accelerated decay coincided with the initiation of a new South Vietnamese pacification strategy designed to prevent just such an occurrence. One aspect of the strategy was the Chien Tang ("Struggle for Victory") Plan. Announced by General Khanh shortly after his rise to power, this campaign was similar in method and objective to the defunct Strategic Hamlet Program. Like the earlier program, the Chien Tang Plan envisioned the restoration of government influence in selected rural areas through the coordination of military and paramilitary operations with social and economic development programs.** While the Chien Tang campaign was better planned and far less ambitious than the Strategic Hamlet Program, there were definite similarities between the two. The instrument for the social, economic, and political developmental phase of the new effort, for example, was the New Life Hamlet—a variation of the planned government community. Begun in some areas around midyear, the New Life Hamlets were to become the symbol of the new pacification effort in much the same manner that the fortified hamlets had symbolized the earlier Strategic Hamlet Program.

Coincident with the Chien Tang campaign, a similar but locally concentrated pacification effort was instituted in the rural areas around Saigon. Designated the Hop Tac Program, this campaign was conceived in order to link the seven provinces around the capital into a zone of intensive pacification in which closely coordinated military, paramilitary, police, and civil activities would systematically reduce Viet Cong strength. Because of their proximity to the area and their availability, the Vietnamese Marine Brigade and the ARVN Airborne Brigade were assigned primary responsibility for military operations in support of the Hop Tac campaign. By midyear, the Chien Tang and Hop Tac plans emerged as the backbone of General Khanh's strategy to stave off further Communist advances in critical areas of the country.

The development of the government's newest pacification strategy, however, was based on the assumption that the Viet Cong would pursue a campaign to strengthen their control in South Vietnam's populated rural areas. Such was not the case. Instead, at midyear the Communists began waging a brand of warfare characterized by large-scale mobile operations against government military forces. Obviously the enemy had shifted to the "general counter-offensive"—that phase of guerrilla warfare designed to bring on the complete political and military collapse of the opposition.

The new Viet Cong strategy revealed itself in two general geographic areas during the fall months. In Binh Dinh Province on the coast of northern II Corps, two Viet Cong main force regiments staged a series of particularly swift and successful attacks which virtually eliminated the government's presence except in the province capital, Qui Nhon, and a few district towns. In a coordinated offensive the Communists increased pressure throughout that portion of the Central Highlands west of Binh Dinh Province, thereby threatening to sever South Vietnam along an axis that extended roughly between Qui Nhon on the coast and Pleiku in the highlands. Meanwhile, another phase of the new initiative unfolded in III Corps where the government's Hop Tac campaign was just getting underway. There the Communist offensive threatened to neutralize

*U.S. Marines figured prominently in the crisis which followed the North Vietnamese attacks. A Marine expeditionary brigade, the 9th MEB, was activated from elements of the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and deployed on board amphibious shipping to a position off Da Nang where it was available to support U.S. contingency plans. Its commander, Brigadier General Raymond G. Davis, and his staff attended planning conferences in Da Nang and reconnoitered possible landing sites near the city, but the MEB was not committed. Instead, the organization remained in existence throughout the remainder of 1964 and into early 1965 when, in March, two of its battalions were landed at Da Nang. The formation and subsequent commitment of the 9th MEB in the Republic of Vietnam are covered in detail in the 1965 history of U.S. Marine operations in the Republic of Vietnam.

**Motivated at least partially by the requirement to provide better support for the pacification strategy, the Vietnamese government restructured its paramilitary forces in the spring of 1964. The old Self Defense Corps was expanded dramatically and renamed the Popular Force (PF). The Civil Guard was reorganized and designated the Regional Force (RF). More importantly, the RVNAF extended its control over both paramilitary organizations for the first time since their creation.

the government's concentrated pacification campaign.

Eroded by the political side-effects of the battlefield developments, South Vietnam's fragile power structure became increasingly unstable. The last five months of 1964 brought frequent changes in the Saigon government although General Khanh was able to maintain a semblance of control until December. The turmoil then climaxed when Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, the commander of the Vietnamese Air Force, engineered a bloodless coup that forced Khanh from the Saigon political scene.

The frequent changes of government coupled with the stepped-up Viet Cong military pressure throughout Vietnam produced a downward spiral in the effectiveness of the republic's armed forces. By the end of the year it was becoming increasingly doubtful that the government could stave off total collapse even with the increased volume of military assistance it was already receiving from the United States. Against this backdrop of Communist military activities, unprecedented political instability on the part of the South Vietnamese, and mounting combat losses, American military involvement in Vietnam deepened.

A Restructured Military Assistance Command

In many respects 1964 was a year of transition for the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Not only did the command experience a change in leadership when General Westmoreland replaced General Harkins as ComUSMACV, but it was thoroughly reorganized in preparation for the more vigorous U.S. advisory program which was expected to begin about midyear.

The major organizational change within MACV took place on 15 May when the MAAG was abolished and its staff integrated into that of the senior command. In June MACV itself was restructured under a new table of distribution. These changes reflected the anticipated influx of advisors and support personnel, and therefore concerned the Army more than the other U.S. armed services.

Initially, the number of Marine billets on the restructured Military Assistance Command staff did not change substantially. Twenty-four Marines (15 officers and nine enlisted) were included in the new table of distribution. This represented a net increase of only one over the number previously assigned to the MAAG and MACV staffs. By the end of September, however, Marines temporarily assigned to the MACV staff from FMFPac commands brought the on-board strength to 37. Another increase occurred in the early fall when eight more permanent Marine billets (three officers and five enlisted) were approved.

Changes in Marine Leadership

Two key links in the Marine command chain that joined government policy decisions in Washington to Marine Corps operations in Vietnam changed hands during the first 60 days of 1964. On 1 January, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., replaced General Shoup as Commandant of the Marine Corps. Greene, known in American military circles as a brilliant staff officer, had been serving since 1960 as Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps. By 1964 he had become an outspoken supporter of South Vietnam's struggle for independence. As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and as a Chief of Service, his presence in administration policies would be felt until his tour as commandant ended on 31 January 1967.

An equally important change occurred in early March when General Greene named Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak to replace General Roberts as Commanding General, FMFPac. A 1934 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Krulak had won the Navy Cross during ground action in World War II. He arrived in the Pacific from Washington where he had served both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson as special assistant for counterinsurgency matters. Having made numerous fact-finding trips to Vietnam in this capacity, he was intimately familiar with the unique political-military struggle being waged there. He also had a reputation of being one of Washington's most vocal advocates of resisting Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. A dynamic leader and a man of strong convictions, Krulak was to exert a pervasive influence over all Marine operations in the Pacific for nearly half a decade.

Less obvious but of immense importance to both the Marine Corps and to the future of U.S. military

operations in Vietnam was a change instituted within MACV by General Westmoreland during the early part of the year. The command's modified table of organization called for the establishment of a Deputy ComUSMACV billet to be filled by an Army general officer. The joint table of distribution for the reorganized command specified that an Army general would also fill the chief of staff billet—a position which had been held by General Weede since MACV's creation in early 1962. Thus, when Weede's assignment ended in May, Major General Richard G. Stilwell, U.S. Army, became Westmoreland's chief of staff while Lieutenant General John L. Throckmorton, U.S. Army, became Deputy ComUSMACV.* The Marine Corps, however, did not lose its entire senior presence on the MACV staff. Brigadier General Carl A. Youngdale, an officer whose 30-year career included distinguished combat tours in both World War II and Korea, arrived 15 January for assignment as Assistant Chief of Staff, J–2 (Intelligence). His presence on the MACV staff would insure a Marine voice in U.S. military planning at the Saigon level. Still, many Marines saw their relative strength on Westmoreland's staff seriously reduced—a change which seemed to mark somewhat of a turning point in the overall management of the military assistance effort.

Redesignation and Reorganization

The reorganization of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, had little initial effect on the Marine advisory program. With the dissolution of the MAAG, the old Naval Section, under which the Marine advisors had operated since 1955, was redesignated the Naval Advisory Group, MACV. Lieutenant Colonel Noren's Marine Advisory Division, whose authorized strength remained at 11 officers and nine enlisted men through the first half of the year, was also renamed in mid-May. Known thereafter as the Marine Advisory Unit, Vietnam, the organization continued to function in much the same manner as it had under the previous arrangements.

The last five months of the year, however, saw some substantial changes in the composition of the Marine Advisory Unit as the advisor build-up recently approved by the Secretary of Defense began. Colonel William P. Nesbit, a recent graduate of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, relieved Colonel Noren (promoted from lieutenant colonel on 1 July) as the Senior Marine Advisor on 4 September. Colonel Nesbit arrived in time to supervise the implementation of a new table of organization which added eight first lieutenants and a captain to the advisory unit in November.* The captain and one of the lieutenants were assigned as advisor and assistant advisor respectively to a new Vietnamese Marine infantry battalion which was in the process of being formed. Four other first lieutenants joined Colonel Nesbit's command as assistant advisors to existing infantry battalions and one became the assistant artillery advisor. The two remaining lieutenants were assigned as advisors to the brigade's motor transport and communications companies, replacing noncommissioned advisors. Two billets were downgraded in rank: the engineer advisor from captain to first lieutenant, and the artillery advisor from major to captain.

In addition to phasing out three enlisted advisor billets, these changes relieved the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor of his artillery responsibilities. Colonel Earl E. Anderson, who had been serving since mid-1963 as the MAAG Chief of Staff, was instrumental in bringing about this particular modification. Under the old arrangement, the Senior Marine Advisor's presence frequently had been required at the MAAG headquarters in Saigon while the Vietnamese Marine Brigade headquarters was deployed to combat. As the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor was likewise torn between two jobs, Anderson had directed that he be relieved of artillery advisory duties. Thus, Major Raymond C. Damm, an officer who had served as Assistant Naval Attache in Saigon between 1959 and 1961, became the first full-time Assistant Senior Marine Advisor after he joined Colonel Nesbit's command in May. When the changes were finally completed, the restructured and redesignated Marine Advisory

*For his service as MACV chief of staff, General Weede was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

*A number of the Marines scheduled to fill the newly created billets did not arrive until early 1965.

Unit included permanent billets for 24 officers and men (18 officers and six enlisted men).

Another important aspect of the overall Marine advisory program was altered in the closing months of 1964. Since Lieutenant Colonel Croizat's tour with the Vietnamese Marines in the immediate post-Geneva period, most Marine advisors had attended French language courses prior to departing for service in Vietnam. As French influence in Vietnam faded during the late 1950s, however, the requirement for the language had gradually diminished, particularly as French maps were replaced by American ones. By the early 1960s this situation had prompted several Marine advisors to recommend that instruction in French be replaced by Vietnamese language training. Primarily through the persistence of Colonels Moody and Noren, the policy was revised in 1964. The arrival of the new advisors in the fall marked the first time that Marine officers had received formal Vietnamese language training before beginning their tours. Colonel Nesbit, who had the advantage of commanding advisors trained in both languages, saw the change as "a marked step forward," in improving the advisory effort.[5]

The Vietnamese Marine Brigade

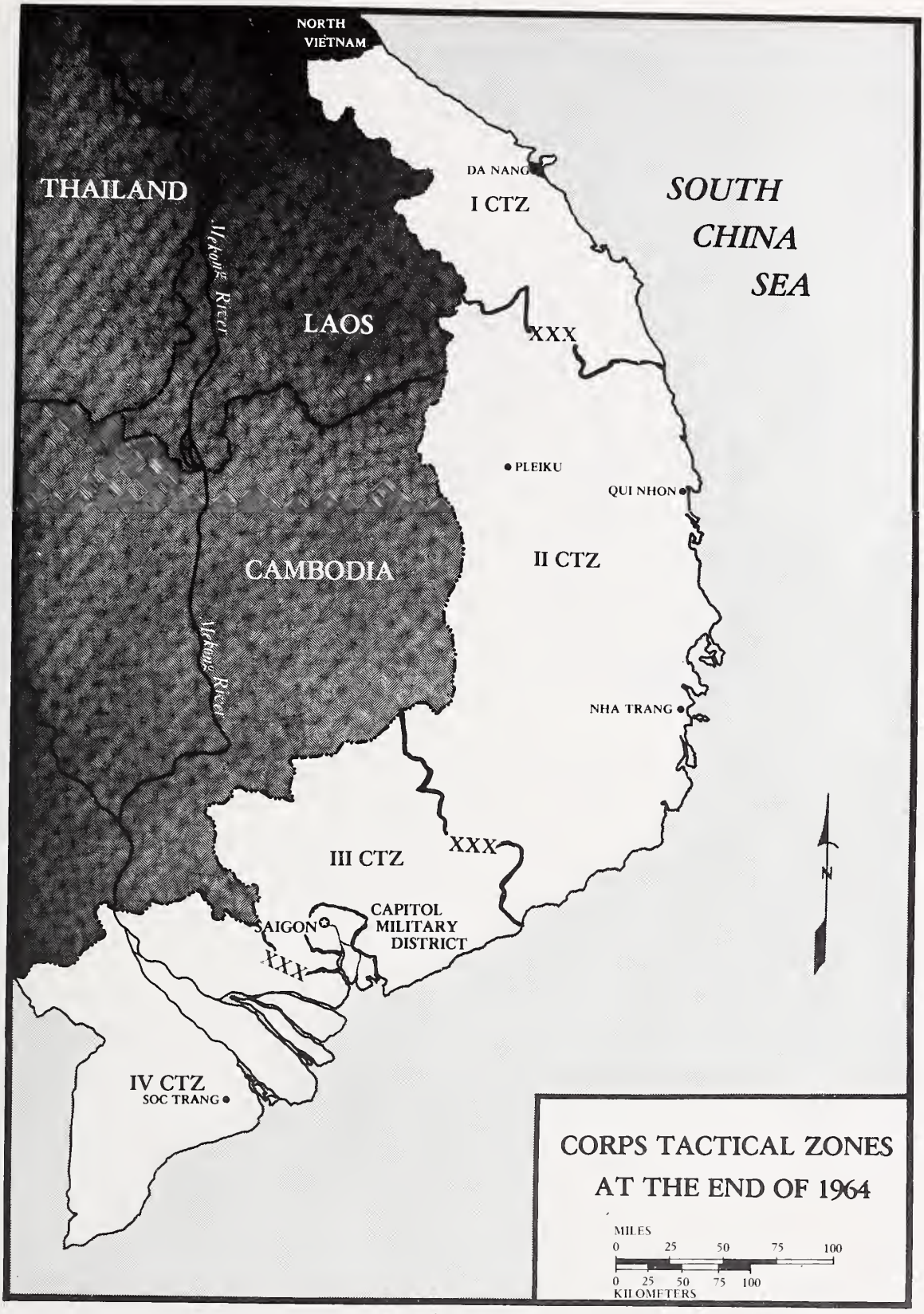
At the beginning of 1964, the 6,109-man Vietnamese Marine Brigade, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien, experienced a crisis of morale. The recent command changes that had occurred at almost every echelon and a soaring desertion rate combined to undermine the brigade's combat readiness. In February the Khanh government recalled Colonel Le Nguyen Khang from the Philippines, promoted him to brigadier general, and reinstated him as commandant in an attempt to restore the unit's spirit. A veteran Marine who had been instrumental in the development of the VNMC since its inception, Khang commanded confidence throughout the corps. Following his return, increased attention was given to the welfare of the individual Marine and his dependents in order to reduce the climbing desertion rate. Under the close supervision of the senior Vietnamese officers and their American advisors, the morale problem was gradually overcome.

Throughout the year the Vietnamese Marine Brigade continued to share the role of South Vietnam's general reserve force with an ARVN airborne brigade. Normally at least one Marine battalion was held in the vicinity of Saigon, ready to respond to tactical emergencies while others operated nearby in support of the Hop Tac campaign. Still, the brigade's infantry battalions managed to see action in every corps tactical zone except I Corps, which was the farthest removed from the capital.* Although sometimes combined into regimental-sized task forces for specific operations, the individual Marine battalions normally were attached to either a corps, a province, or an ARVN division for combat operations. When so attached, the Vietnamese Marines often were assigned to clear particularly hazardous or difficult terrain. At times they served as a reserve force, responding to crucial situations to either recoup or exploit actions initiated by other government units.

In early January, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff assigned a Marine task force to a pacification mission in Go Cong and Long An Provinces, located just southeast of Saigon. Two VNMC battalions, controlled by a task force headquarters, moved into the operations area later in the month and remained until mid-September when the operation was terminated. The object of the Marine unit's presence was to reestablish government control over the region through systematic small unit operations designed to deny the enemy his usual freedom of movement.

Despite the length of this particular deployment, the Vietnamese Marines fought no major engagements. Furthermore, they had not translated their improved morale into an effective pacification operation. While desertions and unauthorized absences remained low considering the duration of this particular assignment, Colonel Noren later recalled several flaws in the campaign. These operations, he

*South Vietnam's corps boundaries were adjusted again in late 1964. The southern boundary of I Corps was moved south to include Quang Ngai Province. The southern border of II Corps was also moved southward to include eight provinces formerly encompassed by III Corps. Under the new arrangement, III CTZ formed a narrow strip across the nation which centered roughly on Saigon. The Capital Military District, the boundaries of which coincided with those of Gia Dinh Province, formed an enclave within III Corps. The southernmost tactical zone, IV Corps, encompassed the entire Mekong Delta.

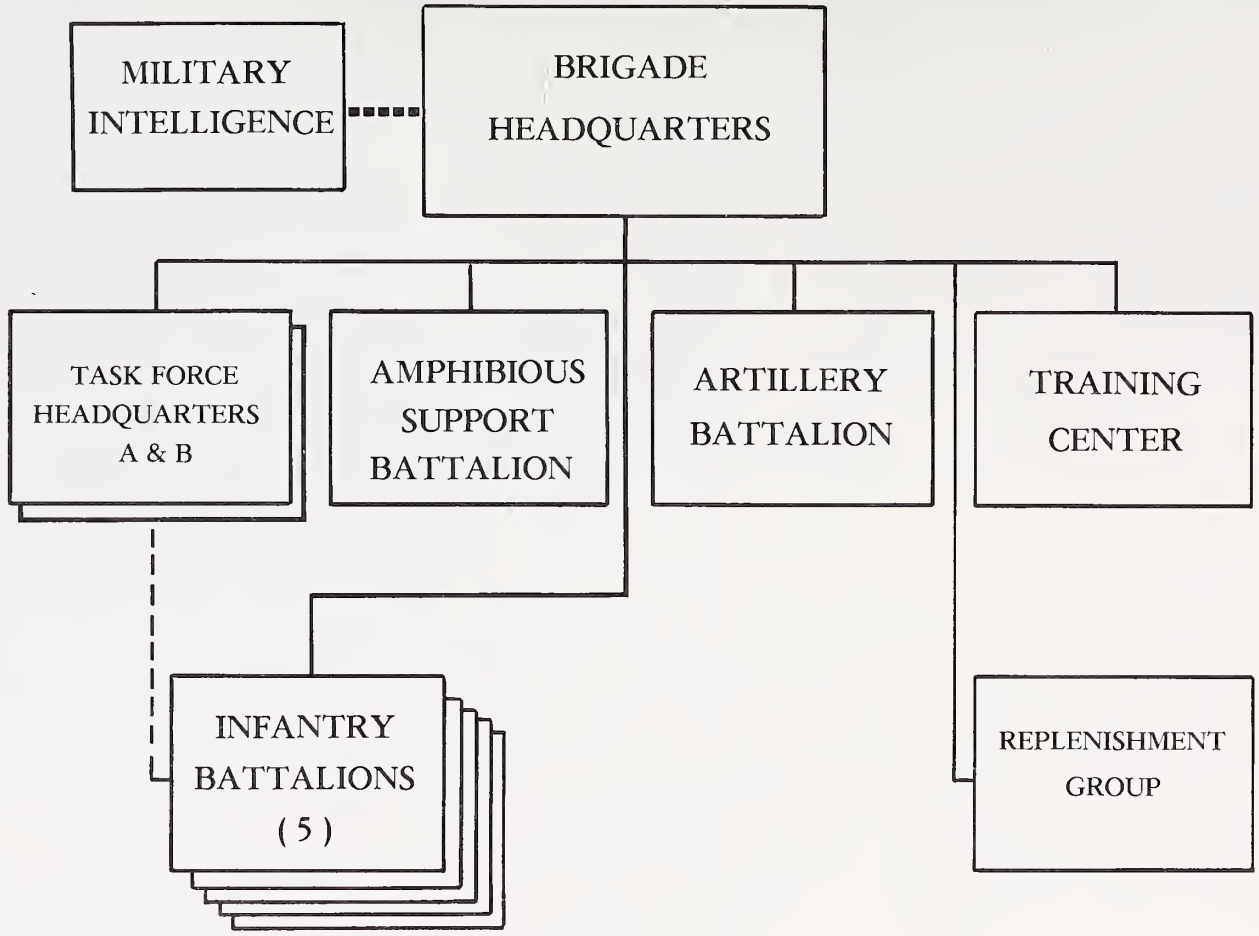

NORTH VIETNAM
THAILAND
Mekong River
LAOS
DA NANG
I CTZ
SOUTH CHINA SEA
XXX
PLEIKU
QUI NHON
II CTZ
CAMBODIA
Mekong River
NHA TRANG
XXX
III CTZ
CAPITOL MILITARY DISTRICT
SAIGON
XXX
IV CTZ
SOC TRANG
N
CORPS TACTICAL ZONES AT THE END OF 1964
MILES
0 25 50 75 100
0 25 50 75 100
KILOMETERS

General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, inspects an honor guard of Vietnamese Marines. With him are Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien, Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, and Major General Richard G. Weede, Chief of Staff, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. (Official USMC Photo).

remarked "were characterized by inadequate coordination of military operations and intelligence reporting . . . too little operational activity . . . and a seeming lack of appreciation of the objectives of pacification." [6] Colonel Nesbit, who became the Senior Marine Advisor as the operation entered its final stages, tended to confirm this assessment. "The capacity of the task force headquarters in staff functioning," he reported, "was marginal." [7]

While the drive to pacify the Go Cong-Long An areas was in progress, other Vietnamese Marine task forces were organized to undertake different combat assignments elsewhere in the southern portion of Vietnam. One, composed of two battalions, an artillery detachment, and a headquarters element, launched a brief clearing operation northwest of Saigon in heavily populated Tay Ninh Province in January. A similar operation involving another task force was conducted the next month in the difficult mangrove swamps of An Xuyen Province at the southern tip of the nation. In both cases the government offensives enjoyed local success, but failed to reduce significantly the enemy's capabilities and influence in the area.

Midyear 1964 found the Vietnamese Marine commanders and their American advisors engaged in renewed efforts to restructure and expand the Vietnamese Marine Brigade. Accomplished for the most part in July, the salient feature of this latest reorganization was the creation of a new infantry battalion. With its nucleus garrisoned at a small base about 12 miles northwest of Saigon, the newly organized 5th Battalion devoted the remainder of the year and the first six months of 1965 to forming and training its companies. It finally became combat ready in June 1965.



VNMC (MARINE BRIGADE) TABLE OF ORGANIZATION AS OF 1 JULY 1964

AUTHORIZED STRENGTH 6,555

Aside from the addition of the new infantry battalion, the mid-1964 reorganization produced other noteworthy changes in the structure of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. In the artillery battalion, the two 75mm pack howitzer batteries were combined into one battery of eight weapons, while the one 105mm howitzer battery was divided to form two new batteries of six howitzers each. The tables of equipment were revised to reflect these adjustments. Another significant change occurred in the area of training. The Training Company was deleted from the Amphibious Support Battalion and a separate recruit training center was created at Thu Duc near Saigon. Tactical planning and control was also improved when the Brigade Headquarters was reduced in size and two smaller Task Force Headquarters (Task Force A and Task Force B) were formed.

Following the mid-1964 reorganization, the Vietnamese Marines performed combat missions not unlike those they had been assigned prior to July. One exception was that the brigade no longer found itself tasked with actual pacification phases of operations. Instead, the Marine battalions concentrated on clearing operations around Saigon in conjunction with the Hop Tac campaign. Additionally, the various battalions were called upon occasionally during this period to provide security for key government installations located in Saigon and Vung Tau—assignments which gave the infantry units much needed respites from field duty.

By the end of the year the Vietnamese Marine Corps had been improved in several areas. In the motor transport field two new pieces of equipment were put into full-time operation—a high pressure steam cleaner and an M–108 wrecker. Progress also was made in upgrading the entire communications capability of the brigade when the table of equipment was revised in accordance with the modified table of organization. The new tables provided for modern test and repair equipment and eliminated obsolete and impractical items. Other unrealized improvements were still in their formative stages as the year closed. In the field of supply, for example, the brigade supply officer, with assistance from his American advisor, was drawing up plans which would give the Vietnamese Marines a more responsive and more manageable system.

While the technically oriented programs were being developed and implemented, intensified training programs were preparing more and better trained Vietnamese Marines for their responsibilities. Established in July, the Marine Training Center at Thu Duc had graduated 1,464 recruits before the end of the year. These recruits, moreover, were trained by Vietnamese noncommissioned officers who had recently completed the drill instructor course at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego. For the first time since its inception, the VNMC was benefiting from a flow of recruits trained by Vietnamese Marines at a separate Marine training facility.

Other programs likewise were helping prepare Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers to command and manage their growing service. A total of 718 officers and noncommissioned officers attended various training courses in South Vietnam during the year while 42 more officers attended formal schools in the United States during the same period. Another 52 small unit leaders participated in on-the-job training programs with U.S. Marine units on Okinawa between January and December.[8]

Unfortunately, these developments were overshadowed by a military disaster which befell the 4th VNMC Battalion on the last day of the year. The Marine unit had been serving since early December as the reserve force for III Corps Tactical Zone. On the 27th an estimated Viet Cong battalion overran the small pro-government town of Binh Gia located in Phuoc Thy Province roughly 35 miles east of Saigon. III Corps officials reacted by dispatching the 4th Battalion and an ARVN Ranger battalion to the area. The 4th Battalion, accompanied by two U.S. Marine advisors and three OJT observers from the 3d Marine Division, was ordered to recapture the town. It proceeded to do so on the 30th, encountering no enemy opposition. Later in the day, while the Marines were developing defensive positions around the town, a spotter aircraft sighted a large Viet Cong force approximately two miles to the west and called for air strikes. A U.S. Army helicopter gunship was shot down and its crew killed while attacking the target.

Against the advice of his senior U.S. Marine Advisor, Captain Franklin P. Eller, the 4th Battalion commander ordered one of his companies to secure the crash site and recover the bodies of the dead crewmen. Accompanied by Eller, First Lieutenant James P. Kelliher, and Staff Sergeant Clifford J. Beaver, two of the 3d Division OJTs, the company moved west from Binh Gia on the morning of the 31st to carry out the mission. After reaching the crash site, the Marine unit was ambushed by a large Viet Cong force using 82mm mortars, 57mm recoilless rifles, and .50 caliber machine guns. Unable to maneuver because of the intense fire, the company radioed for assistance and began withdrawing from the ambush site in small groups.

The battalion commander, accompanied by the assistant Marine advisor, First Lieutenant Philip O. Brady and the other OJTs, responded to the call for assistance by leading the remaining three companies from their positions at Binh Gia. Just outside the town they met Captain Eller, who had been wounded in the face, along with Lieutenant Kelliher and the remnants of the hard-hit company. Eller and the survivors of the morning ambush returned to Binh Gia while the remainder of the battalion pushed westward in an attempt to locate the enemy force. Later in the morning, the Marine column was surprised while moving through an abandoned rubber plantation by a Communist force of between 1,200 and 1,800 men.

No artillery was available to support the beleaguered battalion. Vietnamese Air Force A–1 Skyraiders, however, were able to deliver close air strikes for about 45 minutes. U.S. Army helicopter gunships replaced the Skyraiders on station, but their rocket and machine gun fire proved too light to dislodge the enemy from his positions under the dense vegetation. By late afternoon, 29 of the 4th Battalion's 35 officers, including the battalion commander, were dead. In desperation, the Americans organized the surviving Viet-

Marine Captain Franklin P. Eller, advisor to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion, coordinates with other American-advised units operating nearby. (USMC Photo A183570).

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namese Marines into small groups some of which managed to slip past the Viet Cong and find their way back to Binh Gia.

The Vietnamese Marines had suffered their most decisive defeat of the war. Their losses were extremely high: 112 killed, 71 wounded, and 13 missing out of a 326-man battalion. Equipment losses included 142 weapons and over a dozen radios. Additionally, all four of the U.S. Marines who had participated in the disastrous action had been wounded. Both Captain Eller and Lieutenant Brady were later awarded the Silver Star Medal for their roles in the battle.* Captain Donald G. Cook, one of the OJT observers from the 3d Marine Division, was missing in action at the close of the battle.**

The ranger battalion operating nearby suffered a similar fate, incurring nearly 400 casualties in another violent ambush. Thus, within a 24-hour period two elite government battalions had been shattered. Only later was it learned that the Marines and rangers had clashed with two main force regiments of the *9th Viet Cong Division*—the first Communist division to become operational in South Vietnam.

As a result of the disastrous engagement at Binh Gia, the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion was rendered ineffective as a fighting force for a period of three months. This loss created two immediate problems for General Khang and his American advisors. It reduced the brigade's available infantry strength by approximately 25 percent and placed an added burden on the recruit training center which was already laboring to provide enough new troops to fill the 5th Battalion. For the Vietnamese Marine Corps, 1964 ended on a discouraging note.

*Personal decorations for heroism were awarded more frequently to Marine advisors through 1964. Earlier in the year (16 February), a Marine captain, Donald E. Koelper, an advisor to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion earned a Navy Cross, the nation's second highest award for heroism. Koelper was decorated for warning the occupants of a crowded American theater in Saigon to take cover just prior to the detonation of a Viet Cong terrorist bomb. The Marine was killed by a Viet Cong satchel charge. But his sacrifice limited the number of casualties to three killed and 51 wounded.

**It was later learned that Captain Cook had been wounded and captured by the Viet Cong. Cook reportedly died in captivity in 1967.

Marine Captain Donald E. Koelper, advisor to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion, was posthumously awarded the first Navy Cross for action in Vietnam. (USMC Photo A411741).

Additional Marine Activities

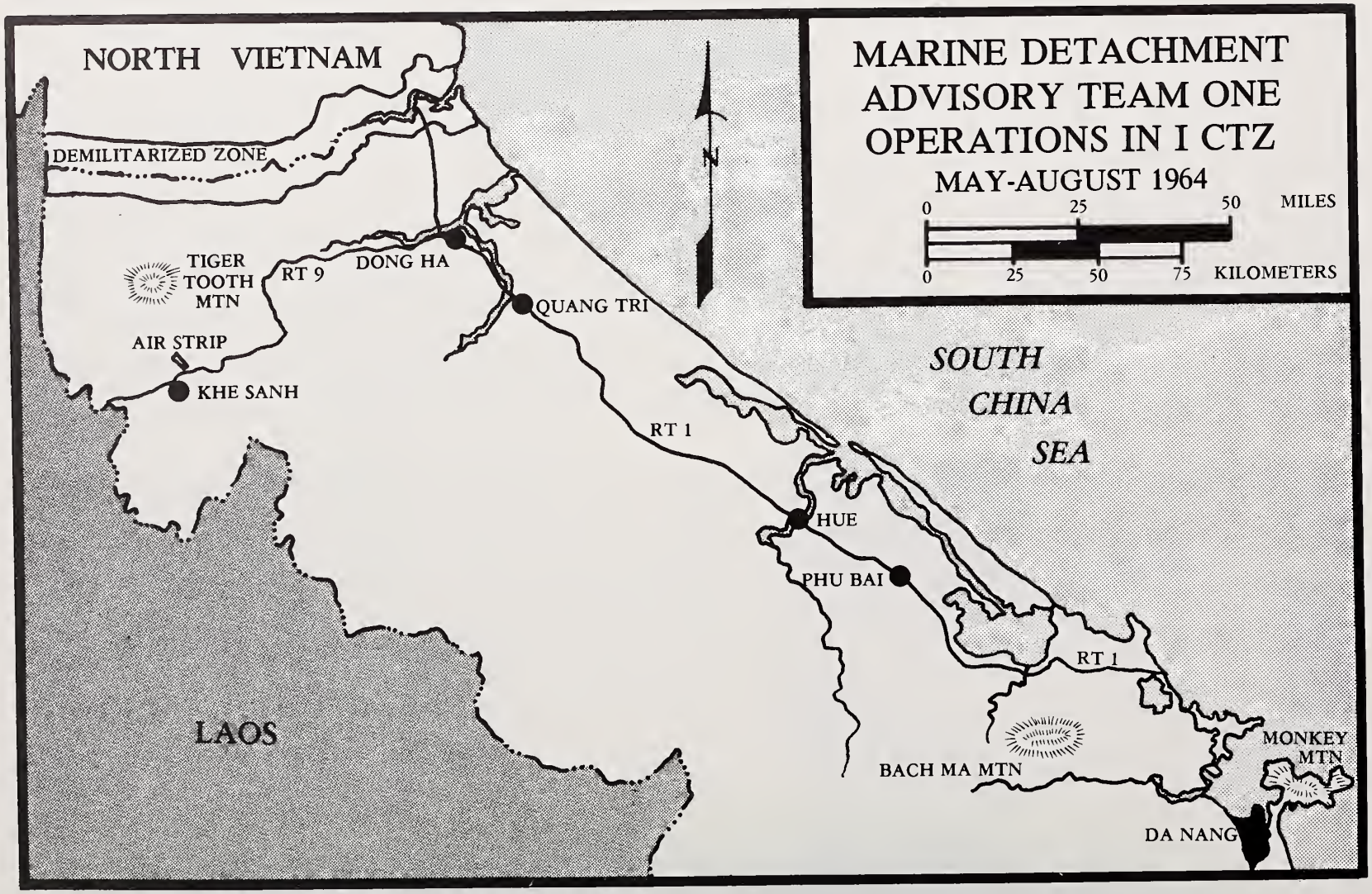
U.S. Marine participation in the Vietnam War during 1964 was not limited to the activities of the advisory division and the helicopter task element. Various other Marine units and detachments made significant, although less publicized, contributions to the war effort throughout the year. One of these was the Marine security detachment which continued to protect the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Twice during the year the growing political unrest and the increasing threat of Communist terrorist attacks prompted the expansion of the security detachment, first in April and again in October. By the end of the year the detachment's strength stood at 30 Marines—a figure which made it the second largest such unit in the world. Only the Marine detachment in Paris, with 37 officers and men, was larger. And nowhere was an embassy guard assignment more dangerous than in Vietnam where terrorist attacks were apt to occur at anytime.

Other groups of Marines performed an assortment of missions in support of the Government of Vietnam during the course of the year. The Detachment, 1st Composite Radio Company, for example, continued its duties at the U.S. Army Communications installation in Pleiku. A handful of these Marines also served at a newly opened U.S. Army communications station at Phu Bai some eight miles southeast of Hue. The strength of the Detachment, 1st Composite Radio Company, however, was reduced from 42 officers and men to only 16 by the end of December.

The spring of 1964 saw a new, substantially larger Marine communications detachment introduced into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. Unlike its predecessors at Pleiku and Phu Bai, this unit was composed exclusively of Marines and included an infantry element for security purposes. Designated the Signal Engineering Survey Unit, the radio detachment consisted of three officers and 27 enlisted men drawn from the 1st Radio Company, FMFPac, and from Headquarters Marine Corps. This element, commanded by Major Alfred M. Gray, Jr. arrived at Da Nang on 20 May along with a 76-man infantry detachment from Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. The infantry element, reinforced with an 81mm mortar section (two mortars), was commanded by First Lieutenant Raymond J. Otlowski. Major Gray assumed overall command of the composite force which was designated Marine Detachment, Advisory Team One. Advisory Team One became the first actual Marine ground unit to conduct independent operations in the Republic of Vietnam.

U.S. Air Force C-123 transports airlifted the bulk of the newly formed unit to the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camp at Khe Sanh in northwestern Quang Tri Province in the closing days of May. Two officers and five enlisted communicators remained behind at Da Nang and a four-man team positioned itself in the U.S. Army compound at Phu Bai to provide radio support for the main body. At Khe Sanh, Advisory Team One initially concentrated on building a solid supply base prior to undertaking actual communications operations. ARVN truck convoys brought the preponderance of its supplies from Quang Tri over Route 9, the old colonial road that snaked through the Annamite Mountains into Laos. While Major Gray and his men proceeded with this task, Marine UH-34Ds from Da Nang helilifted an ARVN infantry company onto Tiger Tooth Mountain (Dong Voi Mep), a jungle-covered mountain located eight miles north of the CIDG Camp. With an elevation of 5,500 feet, Tiger Tooth Mountain is the highest terrain feature in northern I Corps. On 13 June U.S. Army UH-1B helicopters lifted Major Gray, nine enlisted men, and several thousand pounds of equipment into a tiny landing zone which the South Vietnamese troops had hacked out near the top of the rugged mountain. The ARVN soldiers, who had established a rough perimeter around a peak slightly below the mountain's highest point, were on hand to greet the small group of Americans. After the initial helilift, however, bad weather in the form of dense clouds intervened to delay the remainder of the movement for an entire week. SHUFLY helicopters finally completed the mission on 21 June. When the helilift concluded 73 Marines and roughly 100 Vietnamese troops were strung around and across a 5,000-foot peak just south of Tiger Tooth's highest elevation. Another 81 Leathernecks remained at Khe Sanh to provide a pool from which fresh security forces and radiomen could be drawn when needed.

MACV orders explicitly prohibited the Marines on Tiger Tooth Mountain from patrolling or engaging in any other activity which could have been construed as offensive in nature. As a result of this restriction, Major Gray's men were confined to defensive positions around the crude little landing zone and the tents which housed the radio equipment. Even so, life on the mountain was extremely rigorous. The clouds which frequently enshrouded the mountain top left the Marines, their clothing, weapons, and equipment constantly damp. High winds heightened their discomfort. The local weather conditions also made food and water deliveries to the position hazardous and irregular. Marine UH-34Ds prepositioned at Khe Sanh brought C rations and water cans whenever the clouds revealed Tiger Tooth's higher elevations. Often, however, the weather did not break for days. Normally the men were limited to two canteens of water daily—a restriction which made bathing and shaving impossible. Because of the harsh living conditions on the mountain, fresh security forces and radio


MARINE DETACHMENT
ADVISORY TEAM ONE
OPERATIONS IN I CTZ
MAY-AUGUST 1964
0 25 50 MILES
0 25 50 75 KILOMETERS
N
NORTH VIETNAM
DEMILITARIZED ZONE
TIGER TOOTH MTN
RT 9
DONG HA
QUANG TRI
AIR STRIP
KHE SANH
RT 1
SOUTH CHINA SEA
HUE
PHU BAI
RT 1
LAOS
BACH MA MTN
MONKEY MTN
DA NANG

men were rotated from Khe Sanh at two week intervals, weather permitting.

Advisory Team One operated in the extreme northwestern corner of the republic without incident until the second week of July. Then a severe storm struck its mountaintop base, blowing away tents and antennae, collapsing fighting positions, and generally disrupting operations. Several nights later, on the 17th, a Viet Cong force of undetermined size probed the Marine sector of the perimeter. An intense exchange of small arms and automatic weapons fire ensued for nearly two hours. Although the Marines suffered no casualties and could find no dead or wounded Viet Cong the next day, it was apparent that their location had been compromised.

Amid reports of increasing Communist activity throughout the area, MACV authorities in Saigon promptly ordered Major Gray to withdraw his force from Tiger Tooth Mountain. Fortunately good weather permitted Marine helicopters from Da Nang to helilift the men and their equipment from the mountain to Khe Sanh the day after the firefight. On the 22d, Air Force C–123 transports airlifted the entire Marine detachment to Da Nang. There Gray and his Marines crowded into the old French compound occupied by the helicopter task element. Although cramped, the SHUFLY facilities provided welcome relief for the men who had endured the rigors of Tiger Tooth Mountain and Khe Sanh for nearly two months.

While at Da Nang, Major Gray detached a small group of radiomen to Monkey Mountain, a rocky, jungle-covered peninsula that jutted into the South China Sea just northeast of the city. There in relative comfort and safety, the technicians conducted equipment tests for two weeks. Several changes in the leadership and composition of the advisory team took place during this interval. Captain Raymond A. Becker, a communications officer from the 1st Radio Company, FMFPac, relieved Major Gray as the commander of the unit on 13 August. Soon thereafter a reinforced infantry company, Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, commanded by Captain William R. Irwin, replaced Lieutenant Otlowski and the Company G Marines as the advisory team's security element.

Under Captain Becker's command, Advisory Team One redeployed, this time to Dong Bach Ma, a 3,500-foot mountain located roughly 25 miles west-northwest of Da Nang. An abandoned French resort, still untouched by the war, sprawled across the higher elevations of Bach Ma and a hard surface road curved up its steep northern face from Route 1. Using this road ARVN trucks moved Captain Irwin and the infantry element to the newly selected site in advance of the radio personnel. Once atop the mountain, Irwin had his men establish a perimeter around an abandoned monastery. This accomplished, Marines cleared a small helicopter landing zone near the old but well-preserved religious building which was to serve as their base of operations. On 19 August Marine helicopters lifted Captain Becker, his communicators, and some 4,000 pounds of equipment to the site from Da Nang.

Advisory Team One, relying heavily on Marine helicopters for logistical support, operated without incident from the quaint old monastery until the second week of September. The composite unit completed its operations at Bach Ma on the 10th whereupon it returned to Da Nang. Within days the detachment was disbanded without fanfare. The radio experts returned to their parent commands in Hawaii and Washington while Company K was airlifted to Okinawa where it rejoined the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. The quite dissolution of the Marine Detachment, Advisory Team One, ended the first brief and little publicized chapter of Marine ground unit operations in the Republic of Vietnam.

In October an element of the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion, 3d Marine Division, operating from ships of the Seventh Fleet, conducted an extensive survey of Cam Ranh Bay in southern II Corps. The purpose of its survey was to determine the feasibility of establishing a naval facility. Marine counterintelligence teams from FMFPac also were temporarily assigned to MACV for 30-day periods throughout the year. These officers and noncommissioned officers normally augmented the U.S. Army 704th Counterintelligence Unit during their stay in Vietnam. Another group of Marines to employ their skills in the counterinsurgency environment was a small Special Operations Group of six officers and 21 enlisted men. These Marines conducted operations under the auspices of MACV.

A more permanent influx of Marines into the war-torn republic occurred in the last quarter of the year. In response to the intensified advisory effort ordered by Secretary McNamara in July, General Greene, the new Marine Commandant, assured the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the Marines could be expected to carry their share of the increased burden. Shortly thereafter, the Marine Corps was directed to provide 60 officers and noncommissioned officers to serve as advisors with ARVN units in I Corps Tactical Zone. These orders, later described by Major Damm, the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor to the VNMC as "very short fused ones," were executed without delay.[9] The 3d Marine Division was given short notice to select suitable personnel and to transfer them immediately to ComUSMACV. In response to these instructions, the Okinawa-based command quickly formed four advisory teams, each composed of four men—a captain, a first lieutenant, a gunnery sergeant, and a corporal (who was to serve as the team's radio operator). Accompanied by Major John W. Walker, the first increment of Marine advisors was airlifted to Da Nang by KC-130 in mid-September.

Upon reporting to the I Corps Senior U.S. Advisor, Colonel Howard B. St. Clair, U.S. Army, the four teams were broken up, the Marines being assigned individually to battalions of the 1st and 2d ARVN Divisions. Major Walker joined the I Corps advisory staff in Da Nang as assistant operations officer. The balance of the 60 new Marine advisors were formed into teams on Okinawa and airlifted to Da Nang in the ensuing weeks. By December the advisors, who had initially been drawn from the 3d Marine Division, were being replaced gradually by officers and noncommissioned officers just beginning their normal 12-month overseas tours.

Two additional permanent Marine advisor billets were also approved in the closing weeks of 1964. These were created within the Naval Advisory Group to assist the Vietnamese Navy in controlling one of South Vietnam's most troublesome areas—the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ). Located southeast of Saigon on both sides of the Long Tao River, the main ship channel to the capital, the Rung Sat was a vast, difficult-to-penetrate, mangrove swamp. Due largely to its relative inaccessibility, the area had been developed by the Viet Cong into a key base for supporting their operations in the surrounding provinces. More significantly, by early 1964 the Communist-held Rung Sat posed a serious threat to commercial ships bound for Saigon. For this reason the responsibility for pacifying the area was turned over to the Vietnamese Navy in April.

Initially one Marine major, Edward J. Bronars, was assigned to assist and advise the Vietnamese Navy in its attempts to secure the Rung Sat. In November, however, the RSSZ advisory staff was reorganized to include one Marine captain and one sergeant. Although they did not arrive for duty until early the following year, the newly approved billets created the third distinct group of Marine ground advisors assigned to the Republic of Vietnam.[10]

The OJT program continued in effect for junior Marine officers and staff noncommissioned officers throughout 1964. Near the end of the year the program was broadened somewhat to include members of Hawaii-based Marine commands. Each month 10 Leathernecks arrived at Da Nang to begin their 30-day assignments. At SHUFLY headquarters the visitors were briefed as a group before being attached individually to specific South Vietnamese units for the duration of their stay in Vietnam. Normally, the officers and staff noncommissioned officers joined a unit already being advised by a U.S. Marine. When possible, the OJT was assigned to a unit which could benefit from his particular military and technical skills. Still, the on-the-job-trainee was not always considered an asset. "In honesty," one permanent advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps conceded, "OJTs were a mixed blessing—they provided some help but they also were an added responsibility for the VNMC commander who was charged with their safety." "Some OJTs," he added, "received misperceptions of the capability of the Viet Cong since their knowledge/experience was limited to the events occuring during their brief 30-day tour."[11] Nevertheless, a significant number of Marine small unit leaders were able to gain some degree of first-hand experience in counter guerrilla

warfare under the provisions on the OJT program.*

A similar but shorter term program for field grade officers and colonels, the Job Related Orientation (JRO) Program, also took hold during the early months of 1964. Instituted in the last half of the previous year, the JRO program provided for a small number of staff officers from the various FMFPac commands to visit U.S. Headquarters in Vietnam and Thailand for an eight-day period. Small groups of these officers arrived at Da Nang from Okinawa and, like the OJTs, were briefed by the helicopter task element commander and his staff. Later they were afforded an orientation flight over the northern provinces. Next, the visiting officers were flown to Saigon where they received more briefings at MACV headquarters. In the capital, where they were hosted by the Senior Marine Advisor, they visited Vietnamese Marine units and discussed tactics and problem areas with the advisors. After four days in the Republic of Vietnam the Marines travelled on to Bangkok where they spent the balance of their visit. Upon the conclusion of these JRO trips, each officer was required to submit a detailed written report to the Commanding General, FMFPac. In turn, extracts of these reports were forwarded to the Commandant of the Marine Corps in Washington.

Generally these reports addressed tactical, operational, logistics, and intelligence matters. But a number of the Marine officers used the reporting system to articulate their opinions relative to the overall direction of the war. Colonel Warren P. Baker, a member of the 3d Marine Division staff who visited Vietnam in March, pointed out that field advisors and MACV staff members differed sharply in their personal assessments of progress being made. The field advisors, Baker observed, demonstrated far less optimism than did the staff members. Furthermore, he reported that unless the people of South Vietnam could be won over to the government, the Viet Cong's success could be expected to continue.[12] Another officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harry E. Dickinson, summarized his conclusions with an even more emphatic warning:

> The commitment of sizeable U.S. combat units should not be effected except to protect the seat of government. While local success might be achieved in certain areas, it is extremely doubtful whether any lasting degree of success would entail in the northern and western sections. As combat units were increased, the forces of Vietnam would do less and less with the inevitable conflict of overall command. The end result would be the ringing of the country with combat units but no solution for the internal conflict. I strongly disagree that any two or three divisions could achieve real victory as has been stated in the press.[13]

Through candid reporting of this nature, Marine commanders from Okinawa to Washington were kept abreast of the complex and difficult problems being generated by the war in Southeast Asia.

*The 3d Marine Division's OJT program did not end until after elements of the division landed at Da Nang in March 1965. The Marine Advisory Unit experimented successfully with another form of augmentation in the first days of 1965. When the Vietnamese Marines deployed to the Binh Gia area with a provisional brigade in early January, Colonel Nesbit, who was still serving as Senior Marine Advisor, requested additional personnel to assist and advise at the staff level. FMFPac responded by temporarily detaching eight officers and 11 enlisted men to the advisory division. MACV provided two more Marine officers and seven additional enlisted men, all of whom remained attached to the Marine Advisory Unit for the duration of the operation. The temporarily assigned Marines returned to their parent organizations when the operation terminated. This is covered in more detail in the 1965 account of U.S. Marine activities in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 11

Spring and Summer Fighting

The Monsoons—The Weather Breaks—Sure Wind 202—Operations Elsewhere in I Corps—Changing the Watch

Commanded by Colonel Andre D. Gomez, the strength of the Marine task element at Da Nang stood at 450 officers and men as 1964 opened. Lieutenant Colonel Ross' HMM-361 continued its assignment as the task element's helicopter squadron while Lieutenant Colonel Cassidy's 204-man MABS-16 sub unit retained responsibility for maintaining and operating the support facilities.

Shortly after New Year's Day, ComUSMACV advised Colonel Gomez that the entire Marine task element would be withdrawn from the Republic of Vietnam during the first half of 1964. This decision was one of CinCPac's continuing responses to the Defense Department plans for reducing the level of direct American military involvement in Vietnam. Additionally, Gomez was informed that the task element would be called upon to initiate a training program designed to prepare Vietnamese Air Force pilots and mechanics to operate and maintain the UH-34Ds. This program was scheduled to culminate with the takeover of the 24 Marine helicopters by a new VNAF squadron on 30 June, and the subsequent departure of the entire task element for Okinawa where it would rejoin MAG-16, its parent organization.[1]

The Monsoons

The new year broke with Marine flight operations at Da Nang still proceeding at a reduced rate due to the heavy monsoon weather. As had been the case at the close of 1963, medical evacuation and resupply missions continued to constitute the major source of work for HMM-361's crews. The first Marine helicopter loss during 1964 occurred during one such mission on 3 January when an aircraft was shot down while attempting to perform a medical evacuation about 30 miles due west of Da Nang. Hit at least six times on its descent toward the landing zone, the UH-34D crashed into the jungle. Its crew miraculously escaped injury and was rescued by another Marine helicopter. The aircraft, damaged beyond repair, was intentionally destroyed by U.S. Special Forces personnel. This was only the second Marine helicopter loss definitely attributed to Communist fire since SHUFLY's arrival at Soc Trang nearly two years earlier.

In the second week of January the weather over the mountains west to Da Nang broke long enough for Lieutenant Colonel Ross' squadron to accomplish a critical trooplift. On short notice the Marines were ordered to remove a 200-man CIDG force from the hills about 30 miles west-southwest of Da Nang. Accompanied by a U.S. Army advisor, the South Vietnamese unit had been conducting a reconnaissance in force about eight miles west of its camp at An Diem.* Under cover of the monsoon clouds, which limited effective U.S. or VNAF air support, Viet Cong elements of undetermined strength had closed in on the government force, threatening to isolate and destroy it before the weather lifted.

The immediate nature of this particular mission left little time for detailed planning and briefing. I Corps headquarters could only advise the Marines of such vital information as the unit's radio call sign, radio frequency, size, and location. To familiarize himself with the terrain in the vicinity of the pickup site, Lieutenant Colonel Ross first made a reconnaissance flight to the area in an O-1B. His reconnaissance revealed the landing zone to be "a precarious hill top knob exposed to a 360° field of fire," Ross later recalled.[2]

*See map of outposts in I CTZ, page 81.

The reconnaissance accomplished, the squadron commander returned to Da Nang, exchanged the 0-1B for a UH-34D, and led a flight of 14 helicopters to the pickup point. In accordance with the squadron's standing operating procedure, Ross, the flight leader, was to land first, drop off a loadmaster, and lift out the first Vietnamese heliteam. Upon approaching the hilltop, however, the lead helicopter was forced away by heavy small arms fire which punctured the aft section of the aircraft's fuselage, wounding the loadmaster.

The second aircraft, following at close interval, was also hit. Lieutenant Colonel Ross then ordered the entire formation into a holding pattern out of small arms range while he attempted to persuade the American advisor to move the Vietnamese unit overland a short distance to a less exposed landing zone beside a stream. This the U.S. advisor was reluctant to do. "I was convinced," Ross concluded, "that his real concern was the shattered morale of his ARVN troops and doubts about being able to get them moving to the alternate site."[3] After some delay the Vietnamese unit finally moved to the new landing zone, whereupon the Marines completed the troop lift. Still, the helicopters were exposed to unnecessary risks.

Understandably concerned with problems of this nature which tended to plague all but the larger preplanned operations, Lieutenant Colonel Ross questioned the "ability of the advisors to make operational decisions based upon considerations beyond their own tactical problems."[4] In this particular case the selection of the exposed hilltop landing zone tended to substantiate the Marine commander's complaints.

During the second week of January, General Greene, the newly appointed Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited the Marine installation at

Loadmaster directs a helicopter into a recently cleared landing zone. (USMC Photo A329576).

Da Nang. The Commandant conducted an inspection of the compound and was briefed on operations by Colonel Gomez and his staff. After presenting combat decorations to several members of the task element, Greene departed for Hawaii where he was to visit the FMFPac headquarters.

The Commandant summed up his impressions of the Marine helicopter task element in testimony before the House Committee on Armed Services several weeks after his return to Washington. "I was assured by General Harkins and his officers—and by the officers of the supported Vietnamese units—that this squadron has performed its supporting mission in an outstanding manner," related Greene. "Everything that I observed," he added, "certainly attested to the high morale and effectiveness of this unit." [5] *

Late January and early February saw the normal rotation of several of the task element's key personnel as well as its helicopter squadron. On 14 January, Colonel Robert A. Merchant, an officer with a diverse military background, assumed command of SHUFLY. Merchant had commanded an artillery battalion on Okinawa in World War II, a Marine attack squadron in Korea, and had served on the joint staff of the Specified Commander for the Middle East in Beirut during the 1958 Lebanon Operation. More recently he had graduated from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. Having flown with the task element's squadron while on temporary duty in Vietnam the previous October and since his arrival in early January, Merchant was thoroughly familiar with SHUFLY's operations.

Command of the MABS-16 sub unit changed hands two weeks later when Lieutenant Colonel Samuel G. Beal relieved Lieutenant Colonel Cassidy. Beal, also a veteran of World War II and Korea, came from the 4th Marines in Hawaii where he had served as that unit's air liaison officer.

Lieutenant Colonel Ross' HMM–361 ended its tour at Da Nang on 1 February. The squadron's arrival in I Corps unfortunately had coincided with the arrival of the early monsoon rains. The unit's flight statistics had suffered also from the interruption caused by the political infighting which had deposed President Diem. As a result, its operations never reached the sustained tempo which had characterized the records of the Marine helicopter squadrons previously assigned to SHUFLY. Lieutenant Colonel Ross' UH–34Ds totalled 4,236 combat flight hours and just under 7,000 combat sorties—figures which, considering the conditions surrounding their accumulation, compared favorably with the number of combat flight hours (7,249) and sorties (11,900) averaged by the four previous UH–34D squadrons to serve in Vietnam.[6]

HMM–364, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John H. La Voy, a pilot who had flown his first combat helicopter missions during the Korean War, initiated support operations from Da Nang on 1 February. Under the existing plans to deactivate the Marine task element, La Voy's squadron was scheduled to be the last Marine helicopter unit to operate in South Vietnam. As such, HMM–364's pilots and maintenance crews were to launch the training program that would prepare the Vietnamese Air Force personnel to take over the Marine helicopters upon the task element's departure from Da Nang.

On 4 February the first class of eight Vietnamese pilots began a 50-hour package of flight instruction under the supervision of Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's pilots. Included in the course of instruction were operational missions, night and instrument flying, formation work, and landing practice. Each student was already a qualified copilot with at least 25 flight hours in VNAF UH–34s—a factor which allowed the training to be conducted concurrently with normal operations. This was accomplished by having the Vietnamese trainees fly as copilots with a Marine pilot on operational flights. In addition to being an effective training method this system had two other advantages. First, it enabled the Vietnamese students to acquire a first-hand knowledge of the helicopter tactics most commonly used in the northern provinces. Secondly, it allowed Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's squadron to concentrate on its primary mission of providing combat support for the ground forces in I Corps.

Another vital aspect of the training program involved preparing Vietnamese ground personnel to keep the squadron operational. This demanded

*A more frequent visitor to the Marine helicopter task element was Colonel Anderson, the MAAG Chief of Staff. An experienced aviator, Colonel Anderson had commanded a Marine bomber squadron (VMB–443) in the latter stages of World War II. While serving as the MAAG Chief of Staff during 1963 and 1964, Anderson participated in a number of combat missions as a pilot with the various squadrons assigned to SHUFLY.

extensive training of mechanics, crew chiefs, engineering, supply, operations, and ordnance personnel. "This additional duty," Lieutenant Colonel La Voy explained, "was a tremendous burden on all departments of my squadron, whose primary job was to keep aircraft in commission and to conduct combat operations." The language barrier understandably threatened the success of the overall training effort. In La Voy's opinion, however, "the eagerness of the students to learn and the wealth of practical experience and varied demonstrations" combined to help reduce problems imposed by the language difference.[7]

The progress of the program proved the concepts sound. The first small group of student pilots was graduated on 9 March despite numerous flight cancellations due to bad weather during the training period. Subsequent classes of VNAF pilots continued to train with the Marine helicopter task element throughout 1964. Eventually, a more advanced training program would have the Vietnamese pilots flying sections of two and four helicopters as integral elements of larger Marine helicopter operations.

Although heavy monsoon clouds lingered over I Corps throughout most of the month of March, brief periods of good weather sometimes allowed heliborne incursions into the mountainous areas. One such period began on the 5th and lasted long enough for Marine, Army, and VNAF helicopters to lift a 54-man ARVN patrol from An Diem to a landing zone near the Laotian border. During the operation one escorting U.S. Army UH–1B gunship accidentally struck a tree and was forced to land in a nearby jungle clearing. Two Marine helicopters quickly rescued the crew and weapons of the downed UH–1B, but drew automatic weapons fire in the process. That afternoon 15 Marine helicopters and two armed UH–1Bs returned to the crash site with 64 ARVN troops who established a perimeter around the damaged helicopter after being landed. A maintenance team then landed and repaired the aircraft which subsequently was flown back to Da Nang.

Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's crews undertook to correct several problems which they identified during these initial combat operations. One was the need for machine gun fire to protect the port (left) side of the transport helicopters as they approached contested landing zones. To fill this requirement the squadron's metalsmiths designed and fabricated a flexible mount for an additional M–60 machine gun. This new mount was designed to allow the machine gun to be swung out a portside window from the cabin. Placed on each of HMM–364's 24 helicopters, this modification ultimately added a gunner to each crew and enabled the Marines to deliver fire to either or both sides of the aircraft during the critical landing phase of helilifts.[8]

La Voy personally instituted another change which made the coordination of trooplifts more effective. Prior to HMM–364's arrival in Vietnam, different Marines had served as loadmasters for each heliborne operation. While this system of rotating the loadmaster assignment had stood the test of numerous operations since its inception in late 1962, La Voy believed that it could be improved. Accordingly, he assigned one pilot and two crew chiefs permanent additional responsibilities as loadmasters. Thereafter, this three-man team was responsible for coordinating loading and unloading activities at pickup points and landing zones for all troop lifts. Thus, through a relatively minor adjustment, the Marines helped insure the closer coordination of their helicopter operations with ARVN ground forces.[9]

In early March hostile incidents around the Da Nang air base increased dramatically. The incidents usually took the form of sniper fire from the village situated just across the perimeter fence from the living compound. The primary target of the enemy snipers seemed to be the task element's electrical generators whose high noise level prevented sentries from determining the firing position. Tensions heightened on the night of the 15th when a terrorist hurled a gasoline-filled bottle into the doorway of the staff noncommissioned officers quarters. The crude bomb fortunately failed to ignite. Several days later, however, a Marine in the compound was wounded by sniper fire from beyond the perimeter wire.

These latest incidents led Colonel Merchant to request that the security platoon from the 3d Marine Division be redeployed to help protect the base camp and flight line. This request was approved by ComUSMACV and CGFMFPac without delay. On 24 March a 53-man platoon from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at Da Nang on a Marine KC–130 and assumed responsibility for

South Vietnamese troops unload ammunition from a UH-34D while a Marine loadmaster, braced against wheel and wheel strut, exchanges information with the Leatherneck pilot. (USMC Photo A329570).

security around the Marine compound and flight line. Attached to the MABS-16 sub unit, the infantry platoon freed Colonel Merchant's aviation personnel to devote full time to their primary mission—providing helicopter support to I Corps. Like its predecessor which had been withdrawn only three months earlier, the new infantry unit would assist with rescue operations in insecure areas and on occasion would be called upon to provide security around TAFDS bladders during helicopter operations in more remote areas.

The same day that the platoon from the 3d Marine Division arrived at Da Nang, a task element Marine was involved in an act of heroism which later earned him the Bronze Star Medal. While escorting Marine helicopters on a resupply mission about five miles west-northwest of Tam Ky, a U.S. Army UH-1B gunship from Da Nang was hit by Viet Cong fire and crashed in flames. Marine Lance Corporal Walter L. Rupp, a volunteer machine gunner on board the Army gunship, acted rapidly to help secure the area despite having suffered injuries in the crash. Manning an M-60 machine gun, Rupp delivered fire on the approaching enemy while the pilot, copilot, and three other passengers were pulled from the wreckage. All six American personnel, including the injured Marine, were evacuated safely to Da Nang, and then flown to the U.S. Army Field Hospital at Nha Trang for more extensive medical attention.

The Weather Breaks

Much of I Corps began experiencing improved weather conditions during the first days of April. Relying on helicopter support, the ARVN resumed its offensives into the rugged mountainous regions.

On the 6th a combined Allied helicopter flight lifted 42 ARVN soldiers from Tam Ky to a landing zone about 18 miles directly west of Quang Ngai. An Army UH–1B was shot down by Communist fire during the operation. Shortly after the crash, one of HMM–364's helicopters landed to rescue the crew and strip the weapons from the downed aircraft. Marine mechanics then helped Army aviation technicians disassemble the UH–1B whereupon it was suspended beneath an Army UH–37 (a twin-engine, piston-powered, heavy helicopter manufactured by Sikorsky) in a specially designed sling and helilifted back to Da Nang for repairs.

Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's squadron suffered its first combat aircraft loss on 14 April. The incident occurred after one of HMM–364's helicopters was hit in the engine by Viet Cong fire while attempting to evacuate wounded Vietnamese infantrymen from a hillside landing zone about 40 miles west of Da Nang near the Laotian border. Struck while taking off, the UH–34D plunged 150 feet down the steep hillside and crashed through the jungle into a stream bed. One Marine manning an M–60 machine gun suffered at broken leg in the crash. The other crew members and passengers, however, were able to carry him up the hill to the ARVN landing zone. Heavy thunder showers prevented rescue for two hours, but the weather finally broke and the men were helilifted to Da Nang. The aircraft was destroyed the next day.

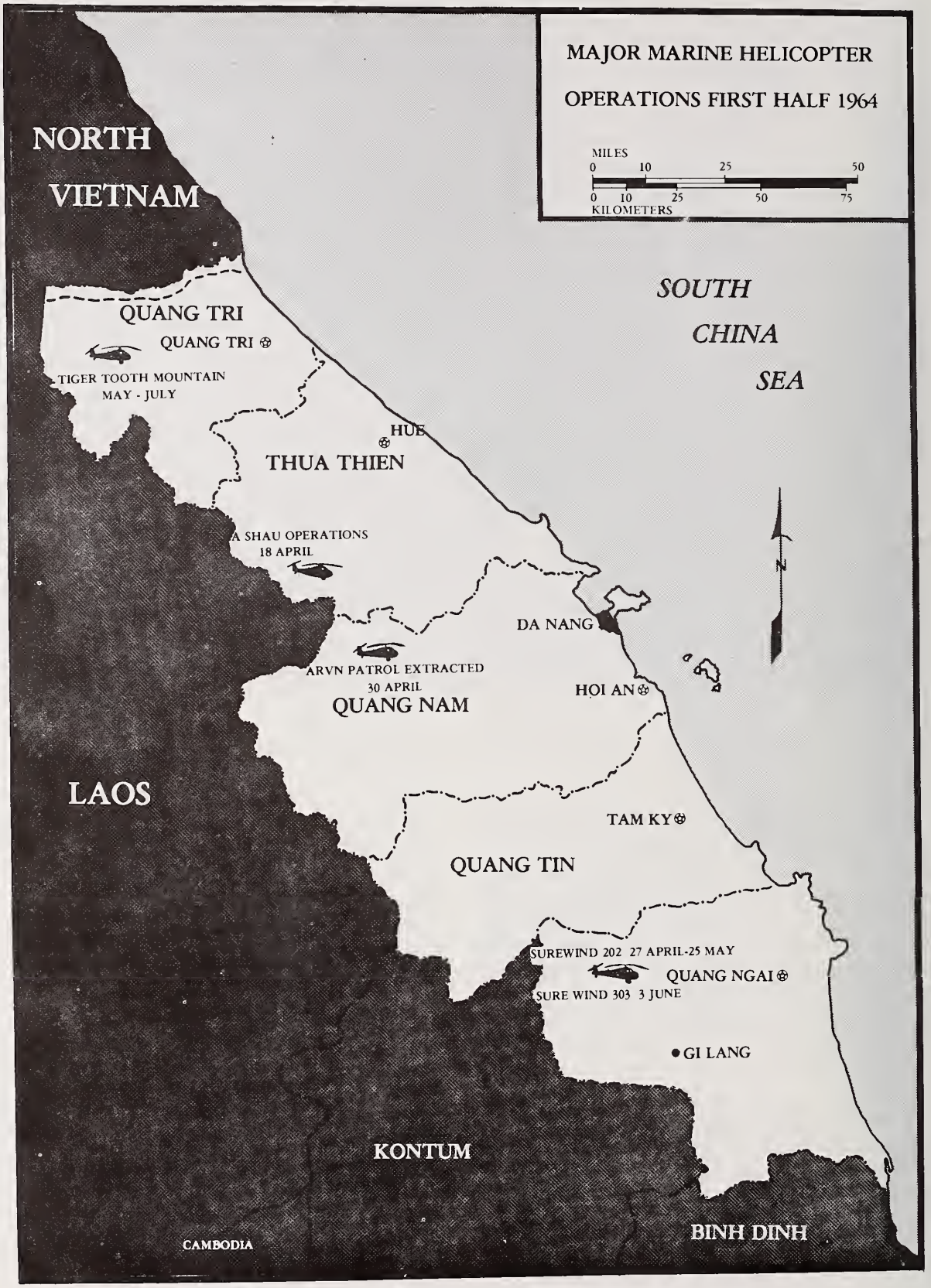
Four days after this incident, HMM–364 committed all available aircraft to a battalion-size heliborne assault into rugged northwestern Thua Thien Province. The ARVN's objective was a mountainous area on the northern rim of the A Shau Valley, a 30-mile-long, two-mile-wide trough whose location adjacent to the Laotian border invited Communist infiltration. Although enemy activity would eventually force the government to abandon its string of outposts in the valley, the issue of control of the area was still unresolved in early 1964.

Colonel Merchant, as commander of the Aviation Headquarters Operations Center for I Corps, assigned 20 Marine UH–34Ds, four VNAF UH–34s, five U.S. Army UH–1B gunships, and three Marine O–1Bs to the operation which the ARVN code named LAM SON 115. Additionally, 14 VNAF T–28s, four A–1H Skyraiders, and two observation aircraft were assigned by the Joint General Staff to provide support for the helicopter assault. The operation was to be controlled by Colonel Merchant as the Tactical Air Commander Airborne (TACA) from a U.S. Air Force U–10, whose radios would permit the commander and his staff to communicate with every aircraft participating in the effort. (The Marine helicopters had UHF and VHF communications, while the Marine observation aircraft used UHF and FM. The Army UH–1Bs had UHF; the VNAF transport helicopters also relied upon UHF radios.)

In addition to Merchant, the airborne control staff from the ASOC included Lieutenant Colonel William Montgomery, USAF, and a Vietnamese officer. The Vietnamese representative was to assist in clearing close air strikes with ARVN ground forces and also was to help resolve any language problems which developed.

The one-day operation began early on 18 April with Marine and VNAF transport helicopters lifting 200 South Vietnamese soldiers from an outpost in the northwestern portion of the A Shau Valley into a rugged landing zone approximately six miles further north. Later the same morning 300 more Vietnamese troops were helilifted from a government outpost in the central portion of the valley to a second landing zone situated six miles north of the 200-man unit which had been flown in earlier. HMM–364's helicopters averaged almost 8 hours per aircraft while flying 160 total hours in support of LAM SON 115. Only one Marine UH–34D and one VNAF helicopter were hit by enemy fire during the execution of the well-planned and efficiently coordinated operation. No aircraft were lost.

Often the daily support flights proved more hazardous then the large assault operations whose details were planned in advance. An incident that occurred on 21 April while a UH–34D was evacuating a wounded South Vietnamese soldier from the mountains 15 miles west of Tam Ky confirmed the dangers inherent in such daily operations. In an effort to lure the evacuation helicopter within range of their weapons, the Communists ignited a yellow smoke grenade in a clearing close by the actual landing zone. The pilot alertly identified the correct landing zone, thereby foiling the enemy ruse.


MAJOR MARINE HELICOPTER
OPERATIONS FIRST HALF 1964
MILES
0 10 25 50
0 10 25 50 75
KILOMETERS
NORTH
VIETNAM
SOUTH
CHINA
SEA
QUANG TRI
QUANG TRI
TIGER TOOTH MOUNTAIN
MAY - JULY
HUE
THUA THIEN
A SHAU OPERATIONS
18 APRIL
N
DA NANG
ARVN PATROL EXTRACTED
30 APRIL
QUANG NAM
HOI AN
LAOS
TAM KY
QUANG TIN
SUREWIND 202 27 APRIL-25 MAY
QUANG NGAI
SURE WIND 303 3 JUNE
GI LANG
KONTUM
BINH DINH
CAMBODIA

HMM–364 loadmaster directs loaded UH-34D into a hilltop landing zone during operations in I Corps. (USMC Photo A329571).

Several days later, Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's Marines encountered an equally clever Viet Cong tactic while performing another evacuation mission, this time in support of a U.S. Special Forces patrol 20 miles west of Thuong Duc. Army UH–1B gunships made several low-level reconnaissance passes over the pickup site while the UH–34D pilot prepared to hoist the casualties through the dense jungle. When the gunship crews reported no enemy activity, the Marine pilot maneuvered his aircraft into a hovering position above the invisible patrol. At this juncture, well-concealed Viet Cong began firing automatic weapons at the hovering helicopter and forced it to seek safety away from the pickup area. The escorting gunships then wheeled in from above, returning the Viet Cong's fire with rockets and machine guns. The enemy promptly ceased firing, whereupon the Marine helicopter again maneuvered into position above the patrol. Again the enemy challenged the aircraft with fire, this time striking it in the rear portion of the fuselage. Although no serious damage was done, the evacuation helicopter was again forced away from the patrol's position.

The UH–1Bs once more placed suppressive fire on the enemy position, finally allowing a second Marine helicopter to hoist the wounded man through the trees. A new burst of enemy fire, however, interrupted a subsequent effort to retrieve the body of a dead patrol member. An HMM–364 helicopter returned to the area the following day and completed the evacuation.

Although neither resulted in U.S. or VNAF aircraft losses, the incidents of 21 and 24 April confirmed that the Viet Cong was devising new methods with which to counter the Allies' helicopters. His use of false smoke signals and his persistent refusal to compromise his position by

firing on the faster, more heavily armed U.S. gunships represented crude but effective additions to his expanding repertoire of counter-helicopter tactics. Although unappreciated by the Leatherneck crews, the enemys' most recent flurry of actions had no lasting effect on the overall pattern of helicopter operations.

Sure Wind 202

In late April Colonel Merchant's Marines joined with VNAF and U.S. Army elements to launch what would be the costliest and most viciously opposed heliborne assault attempted in South Vietnam during the 1962–1965 period. On the 26th, Merchant, Lieutenant Colonel La Voy, and Lieutenant Colonel George Brigham, the task element operations officer, flew to Quang Ngai and Pleiku to participate in the final stages of planning for a multi-battalion heliborne offensive into the Do Xa area, the mountainous Viet Cong stronghold located along the northern border of II Corps. At Quang Ngai officials from the II Corps headquarters had already completed the general plans for Operation SURE WIND 202 (Vietnamese code name: QUYET THANG 202), the size of which demanded the use of all transport helicopters available in both I and II Corps. The Marine representatives learned that HMM–364's role in the upcoming operation would be to helilift a 420-man South Vietnamese battalion from the Quang Ngai airfield to Landing Zone BRAVO, an objective located about 30 miles due west of the pickup point. Simultaneous with this assault, a U.S. Army helicopter company based at Pleiku was scheduled to transport two ARVN battalions (960 troops) from Gi Lang, an outpost located 24 miles west-southwest of Quang Ngai, to a second landing zone about eight miles west-southwest of Landing Zone BRAVO. The operation was to begin on the morning of 27 April, with the first assault waves scheduled to land at 0930.

Due to the distance between the mountainous landing zones and because two different helicopter units would be conducting the respective troop-lifts, the operation plan treated the two assaults as separate operations. A U.S. Air Force U–10 aircraft had been assigned to carry Colonel Merchant, the TACA, and other ASOC representatives who would coordinate the helilift into Landing Zone BRAVO. Twenty Vietnamese A–1H Skyraiders had been assigned to provide tactical air support for the Marine portion of the operation. Twelve of these attack aircraft were scheduled to conduct preparatory strikes on and around the landing zones, four were to orbit above the area after the helicopter landing began, and the remaining four were to be positioned on airstrip alert at Da Nang. Five Army UH–1B gunships were assigned to escort the Marine UH–34Ds to and from the landing zone.

The preparatory air strikes around Landing Zone BRAVO began as the first ARVN heliteams boarded the 19 Marine and two VNAF helicopters at Quang Ngai. Following the VNAF's air strikes, the escorting Army gunships swept in for a pre-landing reconnaissance of the zone. They were met by fire from Viet Cong .50 and .30 caliber machine guns. The gunships c tered with repeated rocket and machine gun attacks on those enemy positions that could be located but were unable to silence the Communist weapons. Meanwhile, the loaded Marine and VNAF helicopters cleared Quang Ngai and were closing on the objective. After the UH–1Bs expended their entire ordnance load and most of their fuel in attempts to neutralize enemy fire, Colonel Merchant ordered all helicopters, transports and gunships alike, back to Quang Ngai to rearm and refuel.

With the transports and gunships enroute to Quang Ngai, the ASOC summoned the on-call VNAF A-1Hs to attack the Viet Cong positions. During ensuing strikes one Skyraider was damaged severely by .50 caliber machine gun fire. The Vietnamese pilot turned his smoking aircraft eastward in an unsuccessful effort to nurse it to the Quang Ngai airstrip. The attack bomber crashed less than one mile from the west end of the small airstrip.

The A-1H air strikes on and around Landing Zone BRAVO continued until 1225. Shortly after the strikes ceased Colonel Merchant ordered the first wave of transport helicopters to land the ARVN assault force. Escorting UH-1Bs were still drawing fire as the first flight of three UH–34Ds approached the contested landing zone. This time, however, the Marine and VNAF pilots were not deterred. The first UH–34Ds touched down at 1230 with their machine gunners pouring streams of

A formation of Marine UH–34Ds lift South Vietnamese troops into mountains southwest of Da Nang. (USMC Photo A329574).

orange tracers into the surrounding jungle. Despite the high volume of suppressive fire, several helicopters in the first wave sustained hits from Viet Cong automatic weapons. One, damaged critically, crashed in the landing zone. Its crew members, all of whom escaped injury, were picked up by another Marine helicopter, piloted by Major John R. Braddon, which had been designated as the search and rescue aircraft for the operation. Another UH–34D with battle damage proceeded to the outpost from which the Army helicopter missions were originating and made an emergency landing.

The second assault wave was delayed while VNAF Skyraiders renewed their efforts to dislodge the enemy from his positions around the embattled landing zone. The helilift resumed at 1355 in the face of reduced but stubborn Communist resistance. During this phase of the troop lift, one VNAF and several Marine helicopters were hit by enemy .50 caliber fire. The Vietnamese aircraft, which lost its tail rotor controls, spun sharply while trying to take off and crashed near the center of the zone. Its crew members escaped injury and were picked up by Major Braddon's rescue helicopter.*

After this incident, as the South Vietnamese soldiers began fanning out from the landing zone and forcing the Communist gunners to withdraw deeper into the jungle, the landing proceeded somewhat faster. The fourth and final assault lift of the day was executed at 1730, after which 357 of the 420 ARVN troops had been transported into Landing Zone BRAVO. During the first day of the operation, 15 of the 19 participating Marine UH-34Ds were hit. Only 11 Marine and VNAF

*For his role in the two successful rescue attempts, Braddon was awarded the Silver Star Medal.

At the loadmaster's direction, a Marine UH-34D waits in a crude landing zone as an unidentified U.S. advisor and two Vietnamese soldiers unload supplies. Other ARVN troops provide security. (USMC Photo A329572).

helicopters originally assigned to support the operation remained airworthy.

The heliborne assault portion of SURE WIND 202 was completed the next morning. Fourteen UH-34Ds from HMM-364, several of which had been repaired during the night, and four Army UH-1Bs lifted the remainder of the South Vietnamese battalion into the landing zone. By then the intensity of the enemy action in the surrounding hills had diminished greatly. Only one Marine helicopter was hit and it suffered only minor damage. Upon finishing their tasks, HMM-364's aircraft proceeded to Gi Lang, the outpost from which the Army helicopter company was operating, to help it complete its portion of the assault lift.

Aircaft losses for the operation continued to accumulate on the second day when a Marine UH-34D was caught in the rotor wash of other landing helicopters and crashed while approaching the runway at Quang Ngai. The aircraft plumetted into an irrigation canal adjacent to the airstrip, rolled over onto its side, and completely submerged. The crewmen managed to climb to safety but the helicopter was a total loss.

On 29 April, three UH-34Ds flew a maintenance-inspection team and a Marine security squad from Da Nang into Landing Zone BRAVO to assess the damage suffered by the two helicopters which had been shot down on the first day of SURE WIND 202. The inspection team found that four bullets had struck the Marine aircraft. The VNAF aircraft, on the other hand, was riddled by nearly 30 bullets, including a .50 caliber round that had severed the tail rotor control cable. The inspection team concluded that both helicopters were damaged beyond repair and proceeded to destroy them where they had fallen.

Originally, MACV and II Corps planners had anticipated that the Marine helicopters would not be required to support SURE WIND 202 beyond the initial assault. It soon became apparent, however, that the daily helicopter requirements for the operation would exceed the aviation assets available in II Corps. The American command in Saigon, therefore, directed Colonel Merchant's task element to continue providing support for the duration of the offensive. Accordingly, the task element commander assigned a liaison officer to the 2d ARVN Division headquarters. This officer was tasked with coordinating daily aircraft requirements. When SURE WIND 202 finally ended on 25 May, HMM-364's crews had contributed 983 sorties and 800 flight hours to the South Vietnamese effort in northwestern II Corps.[10]

Operations Elsewhere in I Corps

While some of HMM-364's crews continued flying support missions from Quang Ngai, others conducted a critical operation in western I Corps. The mission, which already had been delayed five days because of the Marines' extensive commitment during the early stages of SURE WIND 202, was executed on 30 April. It involved 17 Marine UH-34Ds, four Army UH-1Bs (two transports and two gunships), two Marine O-1Bs, two VNAF Skyraiders, and one South Vietnamese observation aircraft. Their assignment was to evacuate a

78-man ARVN patrol which had been under frequent enemy fire for six days in the rugged jungle about 42 miles west of Da Nang. The transport helicopters encountered almost continuous small arms fire during the landing and subsequent evacuation. One Marine helicopter carrying a crew of four Marines and five ARVN passengers was shot down while climbing away from the contested landing zone. The pilot made a forced landing in a nearby clearing and the nine men were evacuated under fire by other UH–34Ds. Despite the hazardous nature of the mission, the entire South Vietnamese patrol was removed to the safety of Nam Dong, a well-defended Special Forces camp located in a valley 34 miles west of Da Nang.

Acts of heroism were commonplace during the 30 April evacuation. One Marine copilot assumed control of his severely damaged helicopter and flew it to Nam Dong after the pilot and crew chief had been wounded. Staff Sergeant John C. Thompson, who served as one of the loadmasters for the operation, was later awarded the Navy Cross for his role in the action. Having arrived in the landing zone aboard the first transport helicopter, the Marine noncommissioned officer exposed himself to Viet Cong fire almost continuously while supervising the loading of each aircraft. After the last five South Vietnamese troops had boarded the final helicopter, Thompson shouted to its pilot that he would remain on the ground to provide covering fire while the aircraft took off. But the pilot ordered Staff Sergeant Thompson on board and then succeeded in maneuvering the heavily loaded UH-34D out of the empty landing zone.

By late May it had become apparent to U.S. military authorities in South Vietnam that the demand for American transport helicopters in I Corps would continue beyond the 30 June date which had been set earlier for SHUFLY's departure. General Westmoreland, therefore, proposed to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, that the Marine unit be retained at Da Nang indefinitely. He further recommended that HMM–364 turn over its helicopters and maintenance equipment to the Vietnamese Air Force on 30 June as scheduled, and that the unit be replaced by another Marine UH–34D squadron. These recommendations were forwarded to the Joint Chiefs of Staff who approved them on 10 June. In response, the Marine Corps began immediate preparations to deploy a new, fully equipped, medium helicopter squadron to Da Nang.

HMM–364 began its final month in Vietnam by supporting another heliborne assault into II Corps. This time the Marines teamed with the U.S. Army's 52d Aviation Battalion to lift an ARVN battalion from Dak To, a town situated in western Kontum Province, to an objective in the Do Xa base area. To support the operation, which was code named SURE WIND 303, Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's crews positioned a TAFDS fuel bladder at the Dak To airstrip on 1 June. Two days later, 15 Marine UH–34Ds contributed 180 sorties to the assault phase of the new government operation. No battle damage was recorded by Marine aircraft during this latest incursion into northern II Corps.

The Marine task element's responsibilities were expanded slightly in the first week of June when MACV directed Colonel Merchant to provide search and rescue (SAR) support for U.S. aerial reconnaissance operations which had begun over Laos and North Vietnam. After 7 June at least two UH-34Ds (one section) were positioned together either at Quang Tri or at Khe Sanh, ready to conduct SAR missions for downed American and VNAF pilots. While based at Khe Sanh the helicopters were also used to support Advisory Team One on Tiger Tooth Mountain. At Quang Tri the SAR helicopters operated from a clearing adjacent to a local soccer field. Years later, Marine pilots who had stood the SAR duty there would recall the incongruous sight of small Vietnamese boys playfully pursuing their soccer games alongside parked combat aircraft and a TAFDS bladder.

In addition to normal support operations, HMM–364's pilots devoted much of the second week of June to a search for Privates First Class Fred T. Schrenkengost and Robert L. Greer, two MABS–16 Marines who had disappeared from the Da Nang compound on 7 June. Intelligence reports indicated that both men had been captured by Communist guerrillas about five miles south of the airfield while sight-seeing on rented motor bikes. The aerial search produced no signs of the missing enlisted men but reliable Vietnamese sources reported that the Viet Cong had displayed them in several villages. The task element commander finally called off the fruitless search on 15 June, a full week after it had begun. Ground efforts by the

South Vietnamese to locate the men continued but were also futile. The two Marines were never found.*

While the aerial search south of Da Nang was in its final stages, HMM–364 suffered its last aircraft loss in Vietnam when a helicopter crashed while carrying supplies from Khe Sanh to Major Gray's Advisory Team One on Tiger Tooth Mountain. The accident occurred on 13 June when a UH–34D was caught in severe down drafts while attempting to land in the small landing zone near the top of the jagged 5,000-foot-high peak. The crew and passengers luckily escaped injury and were rescued but the aircraft was damaged too extensively to be repaired. Marines stripped the UH–34D of radios and machine guns and then burned the hulk.

Changing the Watch

On 16 June, three days after the crash on Tiger Tooth Mountain, Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's unit ceased its operations and began preparations for turning over its helicopters and equipment to the Vietnamese Air Force. The Marines spent three days removing the automatic stabilization equipment (the helicopter's equivalent of an automatic pilot) and the USMC identification from the 24 UH-34Ds. While HMM–364's men accomplished the necessary last-minute preparations, pilots from a new Marine medium helicopter squadron, HMM–162, began flying their UH–34Ds ashore from the LPH–8, USS *Valley Forge*. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver W. Curtis, an Oklahoman who held four Distinguished Flying Crosses for air actions fought during World War II and Korea, HMM–162 was the first Marine squadron since Lieutenant Colonel Clapp's to deploy to Vietnam with its complement of aircraft and maintenance equipment. With HMM-162's arrival, elements of Lieutenant Colonel La Voy's unit began departing for Okinawa on board refueler-transport aircraft from VMGR–152. Also on board one of the KC-130s bound for Okinawa was Lieutenant Colonel Beal, who relinquished command of the MABS-16 sub unit to Major Marion R. Green on the last day of June.

The newly commissioned VNAF 217th Squadron informally accepted the aircraft from HMM-364 on 19 June. Formal acceptance occurred 10 days later with Major General Paul J. Fontana, the commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, attending a ceremony presided over by the I Corps commanding general. Following the exchange of equipment, the Vietnamese officials presented various orders of the Cross of Valor, their nation's second highest decoration, to Marine pilots who had distinguished themselves during Operation SURE WIND 202. Vice Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, commanding general of the Vietnamese Air Force, then presented Vietnamese pilot wings to Colonel Merchant, Lieutenant Colonel La Voy, and to each Marine instructor-pilot who had participated in the helicopter pilot training program. HMM-364's tour in South Vietnam ended officially on 30 June when the last of its members boarded KC-130's bound for Okinawa. Since initiating combat flight operations in February, the squadron's helicopters had logged 2,665 combat sorties and 2,365 combat hours. Another statistic underscored the intensity of the actions in which the unit had participated. Well over half of the squadron's 24 helicopters had been damaged by enemy fire during its five-month deployment in Vietnam.[11]

*The status of PFC Fred T. Schrenkengost was changed from missing in action to killed in action, body not recovered, on 23 July 1974. The status of PFC Robert L. Greer was likewise changed on 14 November 1975.

CHAPTER 12

Fall and Winter Operations

Dry Weather Fighting—Monsoon and Flood Relief Operations—Changes and Improvements—Action as the Year Ends

Dry Weather Fighting

The military situation in I Corps remained essentially unchanged as HMM–162 began its assignment with SHUFLY. Hot, dry weather, with its promise of near perfect flying conditions and spirited fighting, continued over the mountainous northern provinces.

After a series of orientation briefings and familiarization flights, Lieutenant Colonel Curtis' squadron initiated support operations in the closing days of June. HMM–162's first real taste of action came on the last day of the month when six UH–34Ds, escorted by two armed U.S. Army UH–1Bs, attempted to resupply ARVN troops operating in the hills nine miles west of Tam Ky. While trying to locate a Communist position which was firing on the resupply aircraft, one of the gunships was hit and crashed in flames. Two transport helicopters landed immediately to rescue the crew. The Marines pulled three of the four injured men from the wreckage before being driven away from the scene by approaching guerrillas. During takeoff, one UH–34D was struck by ground fire but was able to continue its flight to Da Nang. The wounded copilot of the downed Army aircraft died while enroute to the dispensary, but the injured pilot survived and later was evacuated to the Nha Trang Field Hospital. The heat from the still-smoldering aircraft hulk prevented a second attempt to extricate the body of the fourth soldier later in the day. It was finally recovered on 1 July.

The squadron's first critical troop lift came within days of its initial action when the task element was called upon to helilift urgently needed reinforcements to the Nam Dong CIDG camp which had come under heavy Communist attack. Situated in south central Thua Thien Province at a point where two prominent mountain valleys converge, Nam Dong held special strategic appeal to both sides engaged in the struggle for South Vietnam. It sat astride natural infiltration routes from Laos into the lowlands around Da Nang and Phu Bai and also protected some 5,000 Montagnard tribesmen who occupied a string of villages along the valley floor. The camp and the villages were defended by only a handful of U.S. Special Forces personnel and three CIDG companies, none of which could muster more than 90 men. Its status as a thorn in the enemy's side, its relative isolation, and its proximity to Communist base areas along the Laotian border, combined to make the outpost a particularly lucrative target for the Viet Cong.

Nam Dong's hour of crisis came shortly after midnight on 7 July when the Communists launched a large-scale ground assault against the barbed wire-enclosed main camp. Shortly after 0400, with his position holding out against heavy mortar and machine gun fire, Captain Roger H. Donlon, the Special Forces officer in charge, radioed for assistance. Two hours later, six Marine helicopters, loaded with U.S. Special Forces and South Vietnamese personnel, launched from Da Nang for the beleaguered little fortress. Colonel Merchant, flying an 01–B, led the transport helicopters to the objective area while two U.S. Army UH–1B gunships provided escort. Meanwhile, two other HMM–162 helicopters launched for An Diem carrying U.S. Special Forces officers with instructions to assemble a company-sized reaction force for commitment to Nam Dong.

Intense enemy mortar and ground fire at Nam Dong initially prevented the six HU–34Ds from landing the reinforcements, whereupon Colonel Merchant and the flight returned to Da Nang for fuel. At the airfield the task element com-

mander briefed VNAF A–1H Skyraider pilots and the crew of a Marine 0–1B on the battlefield situation. He took off again at 0910, this time to act as TACA in an Air Force U–10. Meanwhile, a U.S. Army CV–2 Caribou (a twin-engine, fixed-wing light transport) had managed to airdrop small arms ammunition to Donlon and the embattled defenders. Following this emergency resupply, air strikes were conducted on the hills to the south and west of the outpost, causing enemy ground fire to diminish somewhat. At 0945, a flight of 18 Marine helicopters, led by Lieutenant Colonel Curtis and escorted by four UH–1B gunships and two VNAF Skyraiders, began landing a 93-man relief force which had been collected earlier from Da Nang and An Diem. Evacuation of the dead and wounded began immediately. At 1545, a flight of 10 UH–34Ds lifted 9,500 pounds of ammunition, medical supplies, radios, and miscellaneous equipment to Nam Dong. Six passengers, five wounded Vietnamese, and eight more bodies were evacuated to Da Nang on the return trip. By then, the battle was finished. Two Americans, one Australian advisor, and 55 South Vietnamese had been killed. Captain Donlon, who earned the first Medal of Honor awarded for action in Vietnam, and 64 other defenders had been wounded. The Viet Cong, who had failed to eliminate the Nam Dong outpost, left 62 bodies on the battlefield.*

Four days after the battle for Nam Dong, Colonel Merchant's tour in Vietnam ended. He returned to Okinawa to assume command of Marine Aircraft Group 16 whereupon Colonel Hardy ("Tex") Hay, a 1940 graduate of Texas A&M, assumed command of Task Element 79.3.3.6.**

Normal flight operations continued during the remainder of July with no major heliborne assaults conducted and no Marine aircraft lost. These operations, however, did not lack excitement. Supporting the Marine and ARVN forces on Tiger Tooth Mountain proved extremely hazardous as the HMM–162 crews soon came to realize. On 11 July, for example, the mountain nearly claimed one of their helicopters when a UH–34D lost power as a result of the extreme altitude while delivering supplies to Advisory Team One. As the aircraft plummeted into the hillside landing zone, its tail pylon struck the vegetation around the edge of the tiny clearing causing some structural damage. Fortunately, the damage was such that the crewmen were able to make emergency repairs while Major Gray's men provided security around the aircraft. This accomplished, the crew returned their damaged helicopter to Khe Sanh without further incident.

Daily operations continued to produce action for the newly arrived squadron as July wore on. On the 15th a UH–34D was hit by Viet Cong fire while performing a routine resupply mission south of Da Nang. Again, damage was only minor and the aircraft continued its mission. Support for Tiger Tooth Mountain dominated SHUFLY's operations on the 18th after MACV officials ordered Major Gray's Advisory Team One withdrawn to safety. Colonel Hay directed HMM–162 to commit all available aircraft in order to complete the withdrawal as rapidly as possible. Good weather and flying expertise helped the helicopter crews transport the entire Marine force (92 men) and over 21,000 pounds of equipment to Khe Sanh before nightfall on the 19th.

In a simultaneous but unrelated development, HMM–162 was called upon to detach four helicopters to Udorn, Thailand, for temporary duty. These aircraft and crews were assigned to assist with search and rescue operations in support of ongoing U.S. aerial reconnaissance efforts in that area.

In early August, the heightened international tensions which accompanied the Gulf of Tonkin crisis prompted General Westmoreland to order all American military installations throughout South Vietnam to brace for possible enemy attacks. Colonel Hay responded to ComUSMACV's instructions by placing his Marines on high alert status for several weeks. The precautions were relaxed gradually as the crisis eased and the likelihood of a sudden Communist attack diminished.

The pattern of helicopter operations in the northern provinces throughout the remainder of the summer differed little from that which had

*For a more detailed account of the battle for Nam Dong, see Donlon, *Outpost of Freedom.*

**For his role as Task Element Commander, ARVN I Corps Aviation Headquarters Commander, and Senior U.S. Aviation Advisor to I Corps, Colonel Merchant was later awarded the Legion of Merit with Combat "V." He was also decorated with two Vietnamese Crosses of Valor—one for SURE WIND 202 and the other for the relief of Nam Dong.

emerged earlier in the dry season. Medical evacuation and resupply sorties continued to constitute the majority of the task element's support missions. Generally, medical evacuation missions, many of which were executed while Viet Cong and South Vietnamese forces were engaged in combat, provided the major source of action for Lieutenant Colonel Curtis' squadron during this period. On 6 August, for example, a UH-34D was hit by enemy fire while its crew was evacuating ARVN casualties from a landing zone along the Song Tra Bon. Two days later, a second Marine helicopter was hit during an attempt to evacuate dead and wounded from the mountains about eight miles west of Tam Ky. The following day, on 9 August, another HMM-162 UH-34D drew fire while evacuating a wounded U.S. advisor from a village on the coastal plain 12 miles southeast of Tam Ky. In all three incidents the aircraft received only minor damage and were able to return safely to Da Nang.

Although the medical evacuation missions generally attracted more Viet Cong attention, many resupply flights also proved hazardous. Small landing zones, high elevations, and bad weather often made even the most routine missions difficult. HMM-162 lost a helicopter as a result of a combination of two of these adverse conditions—extreme elevation and a small landing zone—on 30 August. While resupplying a mountain-top outpost five miles southwest of Nam Dong, the UH-34D struck a tree at the edge of a tiny clearing and crashed. The crew members were uninjured, but the extent of the aircraft's damage was too great to permit repair. It was stripped of radios, machine guns, machine gun mounts, and other usable parts before being destroyed.

In mid-August the Marines also lost their first observation aircraft since deploying to Vietnam in 1962 when an 0-1B crashed after experiencing mechanical failure. The incident occurred on the 15th while the pilot and observer were conducting a reconnaissance of the northwestern corner of Quang Ngai Province. Bad weather delayed rescue attempts for over an hour, but the two injured crewmen were finally recovered by helicopter and flown to the Da Nang dispensary for treatment. The pilot's injuries were severe enough that he was evacuated to the U.S. field hospital at Nha Trang.

The last major heliborne assault conducted in extreme western I Corps during 1964 was initiated in the first week of September. Eighteen Marine UH-34Ds, four Army UH-1Bs, six VNAF Skyraiders, two Marine 0-1Bs, and two U.S. Air Force liaison aircraft were assigned to support a 2d ARVN Division heliborne offensive against Communist infiltration routes in remote southwestern Quang Nam Province. The operation, code named CHINH BIEN, began on the morning of 4 September when 15 HMM-162 helicopters (the other three UH-34Ds participating in the operation were serving as search and rescue aircraft) lifted the first wave of South Vietnamese soldiers from Kham Duc, a government-controlled town located 12 miles from the Laotian border in northwestern Quang Tin Province. Their objective was a landing zone situated 24 miles northwest of the assembly area in Quang Nam Province and only three miles from the Laotian border. No enemy resistance was encountered and the initial assault helilifts were completed shortly after noon. Support for CHINH BIEN continued the next morning. When the helilifts were finally completed shortly before 1000, Marine UH-34Ds had flown 265 sorties for 180.2 flight hours in another effort to place ARVN ground forces in remote areas of I Corps.

Monsoon and Flood Relief Operations

Adverse weather began influencing SHUFLY's operations a few days after CHINH BIEN ended. On 14 September all flights were cancelled by rain and high winds from Typhoon Violet, a severe tropical storm. All aircraft remained grounded until late afternoon of the next day when HMM-162 helicopters conducted an emergency evacuation of storm victims from Tam Ky which had been hard hit by Violet. The typhoon caused some minor damage to SHUFLY's facilities when electrical power was lost for a few hours. By the morning of the 16th, power was restored and all Marine operations returned to normal.

Within a week, however, a more severe weather disturbance—Typhoon Tilda—struck the coast near Da Nang. On the morning of 21 September, in the face of the approaching storm, Colonel Hay ordered Lieutenant Colonel Curtis to displace his

Marine helicopters enroute to an objective overfly the coastal plain south of Da Nang. (Official USMC Photo).

squadron to Nha Trang in central II Corps. Later in the day, the unit's entire complement of aircraft departed Da Nang on the 325-mile flight to safety. The task element's C-117D found refuge at Saigon. HMM-162 remained at Nha Trang until the 23d when it returned to I Corps.

Typhoon Tilda caused considerably more damage to the Marine base of operations than had her immediate forerunner. Most of the permanent structures in the compound showed signs of water damage and the electrical power was lost for an entire week, except at the waterpoint and the mess hall where a concerted repair effort restored power promptly. Teletype communications circuits were closed for a full week as a result of damage, and the radio link with the 1st MAW was broken for nearly two hours.

While the Marines of the MABS–16 sub unit concerned themselves with cleaning up the debris and repairing their damaged facilities, HMM–162's crews resumed combat support operations. On the afternoon of their return from Nha Trang, a flight of UH–34Ds delivered 19 passengers and 4,000 pounds of cargo to Tien Phuoc, a government-controlled town located seven miles west of Tam Ky. The next day Major General Paul J. Fontana, who as commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing was responsible for the administrative and logistical support of the task element, arrived at Da Nang for a one day visit to assess the damage and to confer with Colonel Hay. Flood relief missions and clean up activities combined with normal flight operations to consume the remainder of September.

Two changes were made in the composition of the Marine task element in late September and early October. On 29 September, the security force from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines rotated back

to its parent unit on Okinawa. It was replaced by a 78-man element from Company E, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines the same day. Led by Second Lieutenant Anthony A. Monroe, the newly arrived Marines would provide protection for the aviation unit until late November.

The second alteration occurred about a week later when HMM–162 was relieved on-station by the officers and men of a fresh squadron. The rotation of helicopter units was completed on 8 October when Lieutenant Colonel Curtis officially signed over the aircraft and maintenance equipment to the new squadron's commanding officer. In a three month deployment to the war zone HMM–162's helicopters had conducted approximately 6,600 sorties for a total of slightly over 4,400 flight hours. Many of these sorties had been missions of mercy flown in the wake of the typhoons which had ravaged Vietnam's northern provinces. During three months of sustained combat support activities, the squadron had lost two UH–34Ds and one 0–1B in operational accidents.[1]

The newly arrived squadron, HMM–365, was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Koler, Jr., an experienced Marine officer who had begun his career shortly after World War II as an infantry platoon leader with the 1st Marine Division in China. Under his leadership the squadron began performing resupply missions the same day that the last of HMM–162's personnel departed Da Nang. On their first day of operations, Koler's crews airlifted over 25,000 pounds of cargo to various outposts around Da Nang. The following day a flight of 12 HMM–365 helicopters provided transportation for ARVN troops who were being rotated between Kham Duc and A Roe, an isolated outpost in southwestern Quang Nam Province less than seven miles from the Laotian border. On 11 October the newly arrived Marine pilots and crews tasted their first actual combat when eight UH–34Ds drew Viet Cong fire while landing a 112-man Vietnamese unit in the hills 10 miles west-southwest of Tam Ky.

The day after its crews had witnessed their first ground fire, Koler's squadron lost its first aircraft in Vietnam. The incident occurred in western Quang Nam Province while a UH–34D was attempting to take off from a South Vietnamese landing zone located high in the mountains. The crash, in which the pilot was slightly injured, resulted from a loss of power due to the high altitude. After the crew was evacuated, a maintenance team salvaged the usable parts and destroyed the aircraft.

In mid-October Colonel Hay summarized the situation in I Corps for his superiors at the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. The task element commander was particularly concerned about a new phase of Viet Cong activity which he saw developing in the coastal lowlands of the northern provinces. Although there were few visible signs of either combat or enemy movement to confirm the trend, intelligence sources indicated that Viet Cong main force battalions in I Corps had increased in number from nine to 11 in the past several months. During this same period, the number of local force Viet Cong companies in the area had jumped by 50 percent to a total of 17. These growth patterns, Colonel Hay noted, enabled the Communists to tighten their grip on the civilian populace. Likewise, they were responsible for increased enemy harassment of lines of communications in I Corps and posed a particular threat to Da Nang.[2]

Colonel Hay's tour as task element commander ended on 17 October. After a brief change of command ceremony during which he expressed his appreciation to his subordinates for their assistance, Hay departed for Okinawa to assume command of MAG–16. His replacement at Da Nang, Colonel John H. King, Jr., an officer who had seen his first action as a fighter pilot during World War II, was well prepared to direct the task element's operations. A recent graduate of the National War College, King had commanded the first operational Marine transport helicopter unit, Marine Helicopter Squadron 161, during the Korean War.

HMM–365's operations continued throughout the remainder of October with only a few significant actions reported. One of these was an abortive medical evacuation mission attempted on 26 October during which the squadron suffered its first combat casualties. The incident, in which both the copilot and crew chief were wounded by Viet Cong small arms fire, occurred while the helicopter was approaching a poorly protected landing zone 10 miles southwest of Tam Ky. The pilot managed to return the damaged helicopter to Tam Ky and land safely, whereupon the seri-

ously wounded copilot was evacuated to Nha Trang and the crew chief was administered first aid.

In early November, at the height of the monsoon season, Typhoon Iris struck the Annamese coast. The tropical storm, whose full force was felt on 4 November, was followed by nearly a week of continuous rain, wind, and fog. The conditions caused flight operations to be suspended except for emergency medical evacuations. When the operations resumed on the 10th, the Marine Corps birthday, the Leatherneck crews concentrated on rescuing Vietnamese civilians from the innundated coastal plains. Between 1700 and 1900 on their first day of the flood relief operation, Lieutenant Colonel Koler's Marines rescued 144 flood victims. These rescues, many of which were accomplished by hoisting the Vietnamese from precarious positions in trees or on roof tops were complicated by sporadic Viet Cong harassing fire. Many of the stranded civilians were evacuated to the Da Nang airfield. Following emergency medical treatment administered by Navy doctors and hospitalmen, the civilians were given shelter in the task unit hangar. Lieutenant Robert P. Heim, the Navy chaplain assigned to SHUFLY at the time, later praised the Marines who shared their birthday cake with the homeless Vietnamese that night.[3] The next day, although poor visibility continued to hamper flights, the Marines helilifted 1,136 more flood victims to safety. Again the guerrillas harassed the rescue attempts with small arms fire, this time hitting three of the participating aircraft.

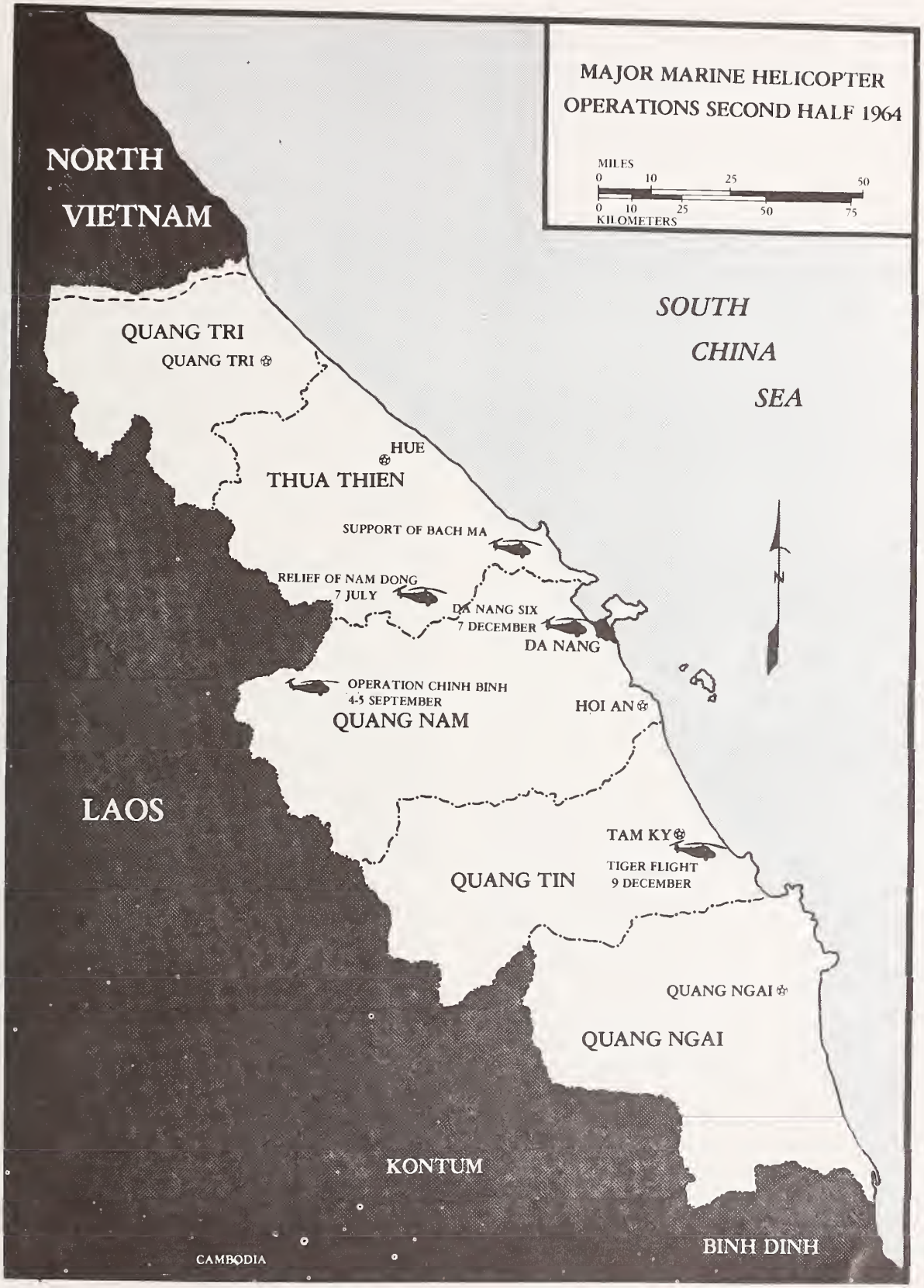
The humanitarian operation continued until 16 November, when another typhoon—Kate—threatened to make matters even worse. The weather on the storm's periphery forced the cancellation of many Marine flights but the center of the disturbance passed about 200 miles south of Da Nang. The flooding which resulted from the two back-to-back storms, however, demanded a rescue effort beyond the capabilities of the Marine and VNAF helicopter units located in I Corps. Accordingly, the Special Landing Force (SLF) of the U.S. Seventh Fleet joined the operations on 17 November. Lieutenant Colonel Curtis' HMM-162, the helicopter element of the SLF, returned to its former operations area and spent six days rescuing flood victims. The Marines evacuated the most seriously injured to the USS *Princeton* where they received emergency treatment before being returned to civilian hospitals. When the SLF departed Vietnamese waters on 23 November, HMM-162's helicopters had flown over 600 hours and completed 1,020 sorties in support of the disaster relief operations. Unfortunately, one UH-34D was lost at sea in an operational accident on 21 November while participating in these operations. Two crewmen, Corporal Richard D. Slack, Jr. and Lance Corporal David Nipper, died in the crash.[4]

With the SLF's departure, the Marine task element and the VNAF 217th Squadron reassumed the full burden of rescue operations until they were finally terminated on 10 December. During this period HMM-365 was forced to divide its flights judiciously between combat support and missions of mercy.*

Changes and Improvements

While some of Lieutenant Colonel Koler's men were employed in evacuating the flood-stricken Vietnamese, others were modifying three of the squadron's helicopters to carry a new weapons system which had been developed specifically for use on the UH-34D. The TK-1, an externally mounted combination of M-60 machine guns and 2.75-inch rocket launchers, was first used on 19 November in support of a Tiger Flight mission conducted just south of the Song Thu Bon about 17 miles from Da Nang. Two armed UH-34Ds expended 90 rockets and 500 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition on enemy positions during prelanding strikes. The effectiveness of the new system could not be determined after this particular strike, but an estimated 10-15 Viet Cong were killed in a similar action by the armed UH-34Ds the next day. The transport aircraft armed with the TK-1 would continue to escort troop carrying helicopters regularly throughout the remainder of the

*The magnitude of the damage inflicted upon the inhabitants of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Quang Tin Provinces by the November storms is borne out by the following statistics. In these three provinces over 50,600 houses were destroyed while 4,870 civilians were reported either dead or missing. Another 12,240 Vietnamese were forced to seek refuge at government centers in the wake of the flood. (CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 17Oct64–14Jan65.)


MAJOR MARINE HELICOPTER OPERATIONS SECOND HALF 1964
MILES
0 10 25 50
0 10 25 50 75
KILOMETERS
NORTH VIETNAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
QUANG TRI
QUANG TRI
HUE
THUA THIEN
SUPPORT OF BACH MA
RELIEF OF NAM DONG 7 JULY
DA NANG SIX 7 DECEMBER
DA NANG
N
OPERATION CHINH BINH 4-5 SEPTEMBER
QUANG NAM
HOI AN
LAOS
TAM KY
TIGER FLIGHT 9 DECEMBER
QUANG TIN
QUANG NGAI
QUANG NGAI
KONTUM
BINH DINH
CAMBODIA

year. At best, however, the TK-1 was of only marginal value. The inherent limitations of the UH-34D, which possessed neither the maneuverability nor the speed to conduct truly effective attacks, reduced the overall value of the system. Because of these limitations the Marines seldom relied solely on the UH–34D for fire suppression during assault missions. The system would eventually be phased out in 1965 with the arrival of Marine jet attack squadrons in Vietnam.

Two improvements, one in the physical facilities available to the task element and the other in the size and composition of its security detachment, were made shortly after the Marines began using the UH-34Ds in the gunship role. On 25 November, HMM-365 moved its aircraft and maintenance equipment across the airfield into a newly constructed hangar just west of the strip. The second change took place the next day when the security force from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was replaced by Company L, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced with engineers, 81mm mortar teams, and counter-mortar radar personnel. This adjustment came in response to the reports of the growing Viet Cong threat to Da Nang. Designated the Security Detachment, Marine Unit Vietnam, the 255-man organization was under the command of Major William F. Alsop, the battalion's executive officer. Captain John Sheridan, the company commander, retained tactical control of the infantry unit.

Although responsibility for the overall defense of the Da Nang airstrip still resided with the ARVN, the enlarged security detachment greatly strengthened the Marine defenses within the installation. Major Alsop divided his reinforced rifle company into two groups—one to protect the living compound and the other to defend the flight line and the new hangar. Around the living compound the engineers constructed a complex of machine gun positions, mortar pits, and ammunition bunkers. A barricade was also erected at a gate near the Marine compound which previously had been open and manned only by Vietnamese sentries. Strong defensive positions were also constructed around the task element's new hangar and flight line. This network included fox holes, barbed wire, and cleared fields of fire. As an added precaution, Company L maintained a reaction force at the living compound. This force was prepared to board trucks and rush to reinforce the critical defenses around the aircraft and maintenance facilities in the event of an enemy ground attack.[5]

Despite the stronger defenses and the presence of the larger Marine infantry force, several security-related problems were still unsolved. One which remained outside of Colonel King's influence was the laxity of the ARVN sentries around the outer perimeter who sometimes allowed Vietnamese civilians to wander into the installation. Another was that a small village close to the Marine compound, but outside the perimeter fence, still harbored an occasional sniper. The task element commander had lodged repeated complaints about both situations with the appropriate South Vietnamese authorities but no action had been taken to eliminate them. In spite of these minor sources of irritation, the recent changes in its defenses greatly enhanced the task element's ability to protect itself against Communist ground attacks.

Action as the Year Ends

While Company L was developing defensive positions at the airbase, HMM–365's crews continued to provide support for both flood relief and military operations throughout I Corps. On 7 December, 17 Marine helicopters and eight Army UH–1B transports were called upon to help trap a Viet Cong force known to be hiding in a village less than five miles west of Da Nang. Code named DA NANG SIX, the operation began at daybreak when the American helicopters lifted 240 men of the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion into the objective area. Two UH–1B gunships teamed with two armed UH–34Ds to suppress ground fire that erupted as the first wave of transport aircraft began their approach to the landing zone. One Army gunship sustained minor damage when hit three times during the exchange of fire. After the enemy had been silenced, the landing proceeded without incident and the Vietnamese rangers quickly secured their objective. In the process, nine Viet Cong were killed and four others captured along with nine rifles and one automatic weapon. Successful though it was, the action on the outskirts of Da Nang confirmed previous reports that the Communists were tightening their grip on Quang Nam Province.[6]

Another indication of the enemy's growing strength in I Corps came only two days later when a large Viet Cong force overran an ARVN outpost four and a half miles southwest of Tam Ky. I Corps Headquarters quickly drew up plans for a multi-company search of the area even though the Communists had withdrawn from the badly damaged government position shortly after their final assault. At 0845, 18 Marine UH–34Ds (three armed) and four Army UH–1Bs (two armed) helilifted a 208-man Tiger Force from Da Nang to Tam Ky where it had orders to stage with other units for the operation. While the U.S. helicopters were in the process of transporting the Vietnamese troops to Tam Ky, an aerial observer sighted a large formation of Viet Cong moving southwest from the scene of the previous night's battle. The observer immediately brought air strikes and artillery fire to bear on the enemy, blocking his escape.

Firepower contained the enemy throughout the morning while the infantry units at Tam Ky prepared to exploit the situation with a heliborne assault. The helilift was launched at 1345. Enroute to a landing zone, located six miles southwest of Tam Ky, the helicopter formation passed over the smoldering ruins of the ARVN outpost where ammunition stockpiles were still exploding. Once at the objective, the armed helicopters began delivering suppressive fire into the surrounding hedge rows and treelines as the troop carrying aircraft approached the landing zone. Still, after nearly six hours of air and artillery strikes, the Communist force was able to oppose the landing with intense small arms fire. No helicopters were hit during the landing, however, and the assault force managed to secure the landing zone. This accomplished, two companies from the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion were helilifted into the position without incident. After the final troop lifts, the Marine transport helicopters began evacuating casualties from the outpost where eight Vietnamese soldiers and one American advisor had died and 20 ARVN and an Australian advisor had been wounded. The government's response to the enemy-initiated action, including air and artillery strikes, accounted for 70 Viet Cong killed and 39 weapons captured. While reflecting a moderate success, these statistics were little compensation for the knowledge that the Communists could destroy a well-fortified position within five miles of a provincial capital.[7]

Weather caused many Marine flights to be delayed and some to be cancelled during the closing month of 1964. But the interruptions were not frequent enough to prevent the task element from fulfilling its support commitments. The only type of support operation actually curtailed due to the monsoons was the pre-planned heliborne assault into the mountains. Brief periods of favorable weather usually enabled the Marine crews to accomplish resupply and medical evacuation missions even into the most remote areas of I Corps, although delays of such flights were not uncommon.

Lieutenant Colonel Koler's HMM–365 was past the midpoint of its assignment in Vietnam as 1964 drew to a close. Through 31 December the unit's helicopters had already flown over 6,700 sorties for a total of nearly 4,700 hours of flight time. Since its arrival in early October, Koler's squadron had distinguished itself not only by providing support to military units throughout I Corps but by its extensive participation in the flood relief operations of November and December. During the 30-day period after 10 November, HMM–365 had contributed a substantial percentage of its flights to the prolonged effort to rescue and evacuate Vietnamese civilians from flooded areas.[8]

FMFPac changed the designation of the task element on the final day of 1964. From that date until mid-March of the following year the Marine helicopter squadron and its supporting elements in Vietnam would be known officially as Task Unit 79.3.5, Marine Unit Vietnam. This change, however, did not alter the existing command relationships. ComUSMACV continued to exercise operational control over the Marine task unit while the Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing retained responsibility for its administrative and logistic support.

CHAPTER 13

Prelude to Escalation

The close of 1964 marked the end of a full decade of American political, economic, and military advice and assistance to South Vietnam. That 10-year period saw a fragile state born and begin its struggle for survival only to have its existence threatened by a new brand of Communist aggression—the "war of national liberation." It also saw the U.S. commitment to Vietnam's defense deepen in almost direct proportion to the increasing threat. Despite growing amounts of American aid and advice, there was little doubt that South Vietnam stood near the brink of destruction at the hands of the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies as 1964 ended.

In many respects, the disaster which befell the Vietnamese Marines and ARVN Rangers at Binh Gia on the final day of 1964 marked a critical turning point in the war being waged in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland feared that the battle heralded "the beginning of the classic and final 'mobile' phase of the war." "To the South Vietnamese government," he reported, "it meant the beginning of an intensive military challenge which the Vietnamese government could not meet within its own resources." [1] Brigadier General Carl Youngdale, Westmoreland's assistant chief of staff for intelligence and the ranking Marine assigned to Vietnam, assessed the meaning of the battle in equally distressing terms. "Binh Gia," he explained, "was just part of the whole thing. All the reserve—the strategic reserve—was fixed: the airborne and the four Marine battalions had all been committed. There was absolutely no strategic reserve left." [2] So, as 1964 ended, hope was fading rapidly among American military officials in Saigon that the ground war for South Vietnam could continue for long without more vigorous participation of the United States.

Pressures other than those produced by military events in the South were also working to move the United States toward direct military intervention against the Communists in Indochina. Although sustained open warfare had not occurred as a result of the Tonkin Gulf crisis of early August, tensions continued to mount between North Vietnam and the United States throughout the autumn. On 1 November, just after the cessation of the U.S. air strikes which followed the Tonkin Gulf incidents, Viet Cong mortar squads attacked American facilities at the Bien Hoa airbase near Saigon. Four American servicemen were killed, five B–57 medium bombers destroyed, and eight others heavily damaged in the raid.

President Johnson's reaction to the Bien Hoa attack was to initiate a month-long review of U.S. policy regarding North Vietnam. In early December that review culminated in the adoption of a two-phased plan to discourage further North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong by expanding the air war. Phase I, approved for implementation in December, called for stepped-up air operations against the vital Communist infiltration routes in Laos, and for the intensification of covert operations against North Vietnam. Approved "in principle," Phase II involved "a continuous program of progressively more serious air strikes" against North Vietnam. The implementation of Phase II, it was agreed, would depend on future enemy actions.[3] As if to indicate that Communist policy makers had settled on a parallel course of escalation, Viet Cong terrorists bombed a U.S. officers' quarters in Saigon on Christmas Eve, killing two Americans and wounding over 50 others.*

The new year, 1965, would open against this portentous combination of intensified U.S. air activites over Laos, a worsening military situation on South Vietnam's battlefields, and the existence of the Phase II contingency plans. It was this situation which would spawn a new series of events as the first months of 1965 unfolded—events which would determine the direction of American

*Among the wounded was Major Damm, the Assistant Senior Marine Advisor.

and North Vietnamese military involvement in the war for South Vietnam. In January, MACV intelligence would learn that two new North Vietnamese Army regiments, the *32d* and the *101st*, had infiltrated the South and had initiated combat operations. Intelligence sources would also report the existence of another NVA regiment in the first stages of formation in Quang Tri Province. When added to a unit of similar size which had appeared in Kontum Province (II Corps Tactical Zone) in the final weeks of 1964, the new arrivals would raise to four the number of North Vietnamese regiments known to be operating on South Vietnamese soil.[4]

The pace of escalation would quicken in early February. The Viet Cong would attack a U.S. installation at Pleiku in the Central Highlands on the 7th. Eight Americans would die in this incident, over 100 would be wounded, and a score of aircraft would be either destroyed or damaged. President Johnson would react quickly to the Pleiku attack by ordering a series of reprisal air strikes under the code name FLAMING DART. Recognizing the possibility of surprise North Vietnamese air strikes against U.S. installations in Vietnam, Johnson would also order a Marine light antiaircraft missile (LAAM) battalion to Da Nang, the American base located closest to Communist airfields. Armed with Hawk missiles, the Marines would protect the growing Da Nang airbase from which many of the FLAMING DART raids were to originate.

American reaction to the Communists' escalation would not be limited to the bombing of North Vietnam. Washington also would authorize the use of U.S. jet attack aircraft to engage targets in the south. On 19 February, U.S. Air Force B–57s would conduct the first jet strikes flown by Americans in support of Government of Vietnam ground units. Less than one week later, on the 24th, Air Force jets would strike again, this time to break up a Communist ambush in the Central Highlands with a massive series of tactical air sorties.[5]

While the events of February would serve to focus world opinion more sharply on the intensifying conflict already raging over Southeast Asia, March would prove the decisive month in terms of the commitment of American combat power to the war in Vietnam. On 2 March, the President would order the FLAMING DART raids replaced by Operation ROLLING THUNDER—a sustained air campaign against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam designed to escalate gradually in response to continued Communist military activities in South Vietnam. ROLLING THUNDER would constitute a transition from the earlier reprisal type raids to a continuing air campaign based upon strategic considerations.

Within a week after the first ROLLING THUNDER strikes over the North, the ground war in South Vietnam would also shift toward deeper and more active American involvement. On 7 March, the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade—the force which had been poised in the South China Sea since the Tonkin Gulf crisis of the previous August—would finally land at Da Nang to provide protection for the air base. Although the Pentagon would announce their mission as purely defensive, the Marines would become the first actual American ground combat battalions on hand for use in Vietnam. With that commitment, the stage would be set for a new and more dramatic phase of what was already becoming known as the "Second Indochina War."

Notes

PART I
THE WATERSHED

Chapter 1
Background to Military Assistance

Unless otherwise noted the material in this chapter is derived from: Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945–1947*, 12 books (Washington: GPO, 1971), hereafter *Pentagon Papers;* The Senator Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decision Making On Vietnam*, 4 vols. (Boston: Beacon press, n.d.), hereafter Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers;* Foreign Area Studies Division, American University, *Area Handbook for South Vietnam* (Washington: GPO, 1967), hereafter American University, *Area Handbook;* Chester L. Cooper, *et al.*, *The American Experience With Pacification in Vietnam*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Institute For Defense Analysis, 1972), hereafter Cooper, *et al.*, *The American Experience With Pacification;* Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1958), hereafter Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon;* Bernard Fall, *Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1967, 2d rev. ed.), hereafter Fall, *Two Viet-Nams;* D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), hereafter Hall, *A History of South-East Asia;* Frances FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans In Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), hereafter FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake;* Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1954), hereafter Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina;* Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of The National Liberation Front* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966), hereafter Pike, *Viet Cong.*

[1] Hanson W. Baldwin, *Strategy for Tomorrow* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 261.

[2] Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, p. 3.

[3] Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 81.

[4] FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake*, p. 42.

[5] Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), *A Translation From The French Lessons of The War In Indochina*, v. II (Santa Monica, Cal.: Rand Corporation, 1967), p. 12, hereafter Croizat, *A Translation From the French Lessons.*

[6] Dean Acheson, *Present At The Creation: My Years in The State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 673.

[7] Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*, p. 46.

[8] B. S. N. Murti, *Vietnam Divided* (New York, 1954), p. 49.

[9] Letter, SecState to SecDef, 18Aug54 as quoted in "U.S. Training of the Vietnamese National Army 1954–1959," *Pentagon Papers*, bk. 2, sec. IV.A.4, p. 3.

Chapter 2
The Formative Years

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: MajGen Edward G. Lansdale, USAF (Ret.), *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission To Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), hereafter Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars;* George McTurnam Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), hereafter Kahin and Lewis, *The U.S. In Vietnam;* Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 2 vols (New York: Praeger, 1967), Vol. II, *Vietnam at War*, hereafter Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, v. II; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), hereafter Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress;* Fall, *Two Viet-Nams;* Pike, *Viet Cong;* Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, vs. I & II; Vietnam Histories Comment File, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, hereafter Vietnam Comment File; U.S. Marine Activities in RVN, 1954–1964 Project Interview Folder Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, hereafter 1954–1964 Project Interview Folder.

Origins of U.S. Marine Assistance

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy: Indochina At War, 1946–1954*, (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Stackpole Company, 1961), hereafter Fall, *Street Without Joy;* Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), "Vietnamese Naval Forces: Origin of the Species," *USNI Proceedings*, v. 99, no. 2 (Feb73), pp. 48–58, hereafter Croizat, "Vietnamese Naval Forces"; Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), intvw by Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, dtd 10–11 Feb70 (OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), hereafter *Croizat Interview;* Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), Comments and supporting materials on Draft MS, Jack Shulimson, "U.S. Marines in Vietnam," pt. 1 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Croizat Comments and Supporting Materials;* Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Croizat Comments On Whitlow MS;* Col James T. Breckinridge, USMC, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Breckinridge Comments;* MajGen William F. Bulton, USA (Ret.), *Riverine Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Department of The Army, 1973), hereafter Fulton, *Riverine Operations;* Croizat, *A Translation From The Fench Lessons.*

[1] Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.), "Notes on The Organization of the Vietnamese Marine Corps," p. 3 (*Croizat Comments and Materials*), hereafter Croizat, "Notes on The Organization."

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Political Stabilization and its Effects

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, v. II; Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. I; Fall, *Two Vietnams;* Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1965); Kahin and Lewis, *The U.S. In Vietnam;* Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars.*

[4] Col John T. Breckinridge, telephone conversation with Capt Robert Whitlow, dtd 21 Feb 74, subj: Early Experiences with the VN Marine Corps (Addenda to *Breckinridge Comments*, Vietnam Comments File), hereafter *Breckinridge Conversation.*

[5] Croizat, "Notes on The Organization," p. 5.

[6] *Breckinridge Conversation.*

Chapter 3

Vietnamese Marines and the Communist Insurgency

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: Department of State, *Aggression From The North: The Record of North Viet-Nam's Campaign to Conquer South Viet-Nam* (Washington: GPO, 1965), hereafter Department of State, *Aggression From The North;* Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, v. II; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams;* FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake;* Kahin and Lewis, *The U.S. In Vietnam;* Pike, *Viet Cong.*

[1] *U.S. News & World Report*, 9Nov64, p.63.

[2] Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress*, p. 164.

[3] Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, p. 360.

[4] Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. II, p. 35.

[5] "Evolution of The War," *Pentagon Papers*, bk. 2, sec. IV.B.1, p. 1.

[6] Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 81.

[7] Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. II, p. 36.

[8] HistBr, G–3, HQMC, "General Chronology of Events in Vietnam,1945–1964," p. 41.

Insurgency and the Vietnamese Marine Corps

Unless otherwise noted the material in this section is derived from: SMA to CMC, ltr dtd 22 March 1973, Subj: Vietnamese Marine Corps/Marine Advisory Unit Historical Summary, 1954–1973, hereafter VNMC/MAU HistSum, 22Mar73; Maj James Yingling, Capt Harvey D. Bradshaw, and Mr. Benis M. Frank, "United States Marine Corps Activities in Vietnam 1954–1963," MS (HistDiv, HQMC, 1963), hereafter Yingling, *et al.*, "USMC Activities 1954–1963"; Col Frank R. Wilkinson, USMC (Ret.), intvw by Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, dtd 14Jul74 (Oral HistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), hereafter *Wilkinson Interview;* LtCol Robert E. Brown, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter, *R. E. Brown Comments;* Col Raymond C. Damm, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File) hereafter *Damm Comments;* LtCol Michael J. Gott, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File) hereafter *Gott Comments;* Col Gary L. Wilder, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Wilder Comments.*

[9] VNMC/MAU HistSumm, 22Mar73.

[10] *Wilkinson Interview.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Damm Comments.*

[13] *Gott Comments.*

Ancillary Effects on Marine Pacific Commands

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Maj T. C. Edwards, "3d MarDiv Counterguerrilla Training: A Readiness Report," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 47, no. 5 (May 1963), pp. 45–48, hereafter Edwards, "Counterguerrilla Training"; MajGen Donald M. Weller, USMC (Ret.), Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Weller Comments;* MajGen Donald M. Weller, USMC (Ret.), intvw by Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, dtd (OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), hereafter *Weller Interview;* MajGen Donald M. Weller, USMC (Ret.), Intvw with Captain Robert Whitlow, dtd 26Sep73, Subj: 3d MarDiv Training Program (1954–1964 Project Interview Folder), hereafter *Weller Interview on Training Programs.*

[14] *Weller Interview on Training Programs.*

[15] Edwards, "Counterguerrilla Training," p. 46.

American Decisions at the Close of 1961

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from : Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. II; "The Fall Decisions," *Pentagon Papers*, bk: 2, sec. IV.B, ch. V and VI; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), hereafter Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days;* Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), hereafter Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares;* Chester L. Cooper, *The Last Crusade: America In Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970), hereafter Cooper, *The Last Crusade;* Gen. William C. Westmoreland and Adm U. S. G. Sharp, *Report On The War In Vietnam* (Washington: GPO 1969), hereafter Westmoreland and Sharp, *Report On The War.*

[16] Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 225.

Chapter 4

An Expanding War, 1962

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: William A. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam 1962–1965* (Washington: Advanced Research Projects Agency, 1966), hereafter Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification, 1962–65;* USMAAG, Vietnam, "Tactics and Techniques of Counter-insurgent Operations" (Saigon, RVN: USMAAG, 1961), hereafter, USMAAG Vietnam, "Tactics and Techniques of Counter-insurgent Opns"; Hdqts, U.S. Army, *The Viet Cong* (Ft. Bragg, N.C.: 1965) hereafter, U.S. Army, *Viet Cong;* Cooper, *et al.*, *The American Experience With Pacification;* Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. II; "The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961–63," *Pentagon Papers*, bk. 3, sec. IV.B.2; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams.*

[1] As quoted in the Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. II, p. 140.

Creation of MACV and Marine Advisory Division

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Senior Marine Advisor letter to CMC, dtd 24Jan64, hereafter *SMA ltr to CMC, 24Jan64;* CinCPac Command History, 1962; MACV Command History, 1962; Marine Corps Command Center, Items of Significant Interest, Jan–Feb62, hereafter *MCC Items;* LtGen Richard G. Weede, Intvw by Hist&MusDiv, HQMC dtd 23Jul73 (OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), hereafter *Weede Interview.*

The Vietnamese Marine Corps, 1962

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *SMA ltr to CMC, 24Jan64;* Capt Don R. Christensen, "A Special Gazette Report: Dateline . . . Vietnam," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 47, no. 9 (Sep63), p. 5, hereafter Christensen, "Date-

line"; Gen David M. Shoup, SE Asia Trip Folder, Sep62, hereafter *Shoup SEA Trip Folder;* LtCol Harold F. Brown, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *H. F. Brown Comments.*

[2] *SMA ltr to CMC, 24Jan64.*

[3] Gen David M. Shoup, ltr to President Ngo Dinh Diem, dtd Oct62 (*Shoup SEA Trip Folder*).

[4] Gen David M. Shoup conversation with BGen Edwin H. Simmons, dtd Feb74 (1954–64 Project Interview Folder).

[5] *SMA ltr to CMC, 24Jan64.*

PART II
MARINE HELICOPTERS GO TO WAR

Chapter 5
SHUFLY at Soc Trang

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: HQMC Msg File; Vietnam Comment File *MCC Items;* CinCPac Command History, 1962; LtGen Keith B. McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation In Vietnam, 1962–1970," *Naval Review*, v. 10 (1971), hereafter McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation."

[1] JCS to CinCPac, 17Jan62, 1212Z (HQMC Msg File).

[2] CinCPac to JCS 28Feb62, 0217Z (HQMC Msg File).

[3] JCS to CinCPac, 6Mar62, 1838Z (HQMC Msg File). DA to CinCPac and CinCUSARPac, 2Mar63 (HQMC Msg File).

[4] ChMAAG, VN to CinCPac, 26Feb62, 0945Z (HQMC Msg File).

[5] CGFMPac to CinCPac 28Feb62, 0113Z (HQMC Msg File).

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] CinCPacFlt to CinCPac, 28Feb62, 2044Z (HQMC Msg File).

[8] CinCPac (Bangkok Th) to ComUSMACV, 5Mar62, 0340Z (HQMC Msg File).

ComUSMACV to CinCPac, 8Mar62, 0941Z (HQMC Msg File).

[10] CinCUSARPac to CinCPac, 9Mar62, 2100Z (HQMC Msg File).

[11] Dir, DivAv, HQMC, Briefing Item, dtd 14Mar62, for CMC Weekly Conf., Subj: Assignment of Marine Helicopter Squadron to ChMAAG, Vietnam.

[12] CinCPac to JCS, 14Mar62, 0712Z (HQMC Msg File).

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] CinCPac to CinCPacFlt and ComUSMACV, 21Mar62, 0412Z (HQMC Msg File); CinCPac Flt to ComSeventhFlt, 21Mar62, 2048Z (HQMC Msg File).

Deployment to Soc Trang

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Commander Task Unit 79.3.5 ComdDiary, 31Jul–5Nov62, hereafter *CTU 79.3.5 CmdD, 31 Jul–5Nov62;* CG 1st MAW, SHUFLY, OpSums, Apr–Sep62; CG, 1st MAW, Ltr of Instruction, SHUFLY, dtd 12Nov62, hereafter *CG, 1st MAW LOI;* LtCol Archie J. Clapp, "SHU–FLY Diary," *USNI Proceedings*, v. 89, no. 10 (Oct63), hereafter Clapp, "SHU–FLY Diary"; Cdr Withers M. Moore, Chaplain Corps, USN, *Navy Chaplains in Vietnam, 1954–1964* (Washington: Department of Navy, 1968), hereafter Moore, *Navy Chaplains;* Capt Robert B. Asprey, "Saga At Soc Trang: Marines In Viet-Nam," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 46, no. 12 (Dec62), pp. 2–3, hereafter Asprey, "Saga At Soc Trang"; VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, USN (Ret.), Intvw by Capt Robert Whitlow, dtd 15Apr74 (1954–64 Project Interview Folder), hereafter *Hooper Interview.*

[15] CG, 1st MAW to ComSeventhFlt, 30Mar62, 0700Z, (QMHC Msg File).

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] ComSeventhFlt to CTF 76 and CTG 79.3, 3Apr62 (HQMC Msg File).

Mekong Delta Combat Support Operations

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Marine Corps Operational Analysis Group, Study No. 1, dtd 12Mar63, "Characteristics of U.S. Marine Helicopter Operations in the Mekong Delta," hereafter *MCOAG Study No. 1;* LtCol Robert L. Rathbun, Comments on Yingling, *et al.*, "USMC Activities 1954–1963," (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Rathbun Comments on Yingling MS;* Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary* (New York: Popular Library, 1963), hereafter Tregaskis, *Vietnam Diary;* Clapp, "SHU-FLY Diary"; CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 31Jul–5Nov62; CG, 1stMAW SHUFLY OpSums, Apr–Sep62.

[18] Clapp, "SHU-FLY Diary," p. 46.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[20] CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 31Jul–5Nov62.

[21] Yingling, *et al.*, "USMC Activities 1954–1963," p. 118.

[22] *CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 31Jul–5Nov62.*

[23] C of S memo 007A20763, as quoted in Yingling, *et al.*, "USMC Activities, 1954–1963," p. 153.

Chapter 6
SHUFLY Moves North

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: Col Julius W. Ireland, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Ireland Comments;* McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation"; *Weede Interview; Rathbun Comments on Yingling MS.*

I Corps Tactical Zone

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: BGen Edwin H. Simmons, "Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1965–1966," *Naval Review*, 1968, hereafter Simmons, "Marine Corps Operations in RVN, 65–66"; McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation"; Fall, *Street Without Joy;* Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification, 1962–65.*

Military Situation, September 1962

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Col Francis J. Kelly, USA, *U.S. Army Special Forces 1961–1971* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), hereafter Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces;* MACV J–2 ltr to CTU 79.3.5, dtd 11Oct62, Subj: Intelligence Estimate, Period Oct62–Feb63 (Encl D–17 to CTU 79.3.5 ComdD), hereafter *MACV Intell Est, 11Oct62.*

[1] *MACV Intel Est, 11Oct62.*

[2] *Ibid.*

Initial Helicopter Operations

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 31Jul–5Nov62;* CG 1st MAW, SHUFLY, OpSums, Sep–Dec62; McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation"; *Ireland Comments; Rathbun Comments on Yingling MS.*

[3] *MCC Items*, 7Oct62.

[4] CTU 79.3.5 ltr to CG 1st MAW, dtd 4Oct62, Subj: Rotation of Task Unit Personnel to South Vietnam (encl. D–15, *CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 6Apr–5Nov62*).

Chapter 7
The Laotian Crisis, 1962

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: 3d Marine Expeditionary Unit Special Report, 16May–7Aug 1962, hereafter *3d MEU Special Report;* CinCPac Operations Plan 32–59 Phase II (Laos), hereafter *OpPlan 32–59; Weller Interview; Croizat Interview; MCC Items*, May, Jun, Jul62; Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days;* Cooper, *The Lost Crusade;* Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and The Pathet Lao: Partners in The Struggle For Laos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), hereafter Langer and Zasloff, *North Vietnam and The Pathet Lao;* LtGen Ormond R. Simpson, USMC (Ret.) Comments on 2d Draft MS, Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1963," (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Simpson Comments;* Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Policy Toward Communist China: The Historical Record* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1972), hereafter Dulles, *American Policy Toward Communist China;* Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares.*

[1] *MCC Items:* 16 May 62.

[2] *Croizat Interview; Weller Interview.*

PART III
THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES, 1963

Chapter 8
The Marine Advisory Effort

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake;* "The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, May–November, 1963," *Pentagon Papers*, bk. 3, sec. IV.B.5; Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. III; Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution;* Kahin and Lewis, *The U.S. In Vietnam.*

The Advisory Division and VNMC Operations

Unless otherwise noted the material in this section is derived from: Senior Marine Advisor, MACV, Monthly Historical Summaries, 1963–1965, hereafter *SMA, MACV HistSums;* Col Wesley C. Noren, Comments on Draft MS, Maj Harvey Bradshaw, "U.S. Marine Corps Operations in RVN, 1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Noren Comments on Bradshaw MS;* Col Wesley C. Noren, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–1964', (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Noren Comments On Whitlow MS;* Col Clarence G. Moody, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Moody Comments;* LtCol James P. McWilliams, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *McWilliams Comments;* LtCol Joseph N. Smith, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitelow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Smith Comments;* LtCol Joseph N. Smith intvw by Capt Robert Whitlow (1954–1964 Project Interview Folder), hereafter *Smith Interview;* Col Edwin F. Black, USA, and Lt R. P. W. Murphy, USNR, "The South Vietnamese Navy," *USNI Proceedings*, v. 90, no. 1 (Jan64) pp. 52–62, hereafter, Black and Murphy, "The South Vietnamese Navy"; Maj Alfred J. Croft, "A Special Gazette Report: Dateline, Vietnam," *Marine Corps Gazette* v. 47, n. 10 (Oct63), p. 18, hereafter Croft, "Dateline, Vietnam"; Christenson, "Dateline"; Capt. James P. McWilliams, "Pacify and Hold," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 49, no. 2 (Feb65), p. 56, hereafter McWilliams, *Pacify and Hold.*

[1] *Moody Comments; Weede Interview.*

[2] *McWilliams Comments.*

[3] *Smith Interview.*

[4] *Noren Comments on Whitlow MS.*

Chapter 9
SHUFLY Operations

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov62–31Oct63; CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 31Oct63–14Jan64; Col Thomas J. Ross, Comments on Draft MS, Bradshaw, "U.S. Marine Corps Operations in RVN, 1964," (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Ross Comments on Bradshaw MS.*

[1] McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation."

Combat Support Operations

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov62–31Oct63; CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 31Oct63–14Jan64; CTE 79.3.3.6 After Action Reports, 26Apr–20May63, hereafter *CTE 79.3.6 AAR;* McCutcheon, "Marine Aviation"; MajGen Paul J. Fontana, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964," (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Fontana Comments;* Col Thomas J. Ross, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Ross Comments On Whitlow MS; Ross Comments On Bradshaw MS; H. F. Brown Comments.*

[2] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov–31Oct63.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *CTE 79.3.3.6 AAR*, 19May63.

[5] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov–31Oct63.

[6] Aviation Headquarters Operations Center SOP, p. 1 (encl 5, CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 18Jul–31Oct63).

[7] Col A. D. Gomez ltr to Coordinator, Marine Corps Landing Force Development Center, dated 23Oct63 (encl 1, CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 18Jul–31Oct63).

[8] 1st MAW OpSums, 8Jun–20Oct63.

[9] *Ross Comments on Bradshaw MS.*

[10] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 6Nov63–14Jan64.

The Situation in Vietnam

Unless otherwise noted the material in this chapter is derived from: Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. II; Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification, 1962–65;* Fall, *Two Viet-Nams;* Cooper, *The Lost Crusade;* Department of State, *Aggression from the North.*

[11] Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification, 1962–65.*

PART IV
AN EXPANDING GROUND WAR, 1964

Chapter 10
Marines Meet the Challenge

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, USMC (Ret.) intvw by Hist& MusDiv, HQMC, dtd 24Jul73 (OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), hereafter *Youngdale Interview;* MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, USMC (Ret.), Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam, 1954–64" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter, *Youngdale Comments;* Westmoreland and Sharp, *Report On The War;* Cooper, *et al.*, *The American Experience With Pacification, 1962–65;* "Military Pressures Against North Vietnam, July–Oct 1964," *Pentagon Papers*, bk. 4, sec. IV.C.2; Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. III; CinCPac Command History, 1964, hereafter *CinCPac ComdHist, 64;* U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Command History, 1964, hereafter MACV ComdHist, 64; Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification, 1962–65.*

[1] Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. III, p. 501.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*, v. II, p. 471.

[4] "Military Pressures Against North Vietnam, Jul–Oct 1964," *Pentagon Papers*, bk. 4, sec. IV.C.2(b), p. 42.

Redesignation and Reorganization

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: Senior Marine Advisor, MACV, After Action Reports, 1964–65, hereafter *SMA, MACV, AARs 64–65;* Col William P. Nesbit, USMC (Ret.), Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Nesbit Comments On Whitlow MS;* Col William P. Nesbit, USMC (Ret.), Comments on Draft MS, Maj Harvey Bradshaw, "U.S. Marine Corps Operations In RVN, 1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Nesbit Comments on Bradshaw MS; Noren Comments on Whitlow MS; Noren Comments on Bradshaw MS;* James C. Pickerell, "Marine Advisor: Vietnam," *Marine Corps Gazette*, v. 48, n. 4 (Apr64), hereafter Pickerall, "Marine Advisor"; *Damm Comments.*

[5] *Nesbit Comments on Bradshaw MS.*

The Vietnamese Marine Brigade

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *SMA, MACV, AARs, 64–65;* CG FMFPac On-The-Job-Training, RVN, Monthly Reports, Jan–Dec, 1964, hereafter *OJT Monthly Repts, 64;* Capt Philip O. Brady, intvw by HistBr, G–3 Div, HQMC, dtd 26Jan66 (OralHistColl, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), hereafter *Brady Interview;* Westmoreland and Sharp, *Report On The War;* Pickerell, "Marine Advisor"; Naval Advisory Group, MACV, Historical Review, 1964–65, hereafter NAVGP, MACV, HistRevw, 64–65.

[6] *Noren Comments on Whitlow MS.*

[7] *Nesbit Comments on Whitlow MS.*

[8] NAVGP, MACV, HistRevw, 64–65, p. 21.

Additional Marine Activities

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: LtCol Raymond Becker, intvw with Capt Robert Whitlow, dtd 25Jan74 (1954–64 Project Interview Folder), hereafter *Becker Interview;* Capt Charles H. Gallina, Intvw with Capt Robert Whitlow, dtd 29Jan74 (1954–64 Project Interview Folder), hereafter *Gallina Interview;* Director of Intelligence, HQMC, to Director, History and Museums Division, dtd 31Jan74, Subj: Summary of U.S. Marine Corps Operations at Tiger Tooth Mountain and Dong Bach Ma in 1964, hereafter "Summary of USMC Opns at Tiger Tooth Mountain"; Col Raymond C. Damm intvw with Captain Robert H. Whitlow, dtd 19Jul73 (1954–64 Project Interview Folder), hereafter *Damm Interview;* NAVG, MACV, HistRevw, 64–65; CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64.

[9] *Damm Interview.*

[10] NAVG, MACV, HistRevw, 64–65, p. 14.

[11] *Smith Comments.*

[12] Col Warren P. Baker, ltr to CG, 3dMarDiv, dtd 3Apr64, Subj: Job Related Orientation Report.

[13] CG, FMFPac ltr to CMC 18Mar64, Subj: SVN Observations.

Chapter 11

Spring and Summer Fighting

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64; Col Andre Gomez, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities in Vietnam 1954–64" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Gomez Comments;* Col Robert A. Merchant, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Merchant Comments;* Col John H. La Voy, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *La Voy Comments; Ross Comments on Whitlow MS;* LtGen Herman Nickerson, USMC (Ret.), Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Nickerson Comments.*

[1] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64.

[2] *Ross Comments on Whitlow MS.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Statement of General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., CMC, before the House Committee On Armed Services, dtd March 1964 (Greene Papers Collection).

[6] CTE ComdD 79.3.3.6, 1Nov63–16Oct64.

[7] *La Voy Comments.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64; *Merchant Comments; La Voy Comments.*

[11] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64.

Chapter 12

Fall and Winter Operations

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is derived from: CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64; CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 17Oct64–14Jan65; 1st MAW OpSums, 9Jul64–7Oct64; CinCPac CmdHist 64; *Fontana Comments;* BGen Joseph Koler, USMC, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Koler Comments;* Col Hardy Hay, Comments on Draft MS, Capt Robert Whitlow, "U.S. Marine Activities In Vietnam, 1954–1964" (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter *Hay Comments; Becker Comments; Merchant Comments; Nickerson Comments;* Capt Roger H. Donlon, USA, *Outpost of Freedom* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), hereafter Donlon, *Outpost of Freedom;* Moore, *Navy Chaplains.*

[1] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64; CG 1st MAW OpSums, 9Jul–7Oct64.

[2] CTE 79.3.3.6 ComdD, 1Nov63–16Oct64.

[3] Moore, *Navy Chaplains*, p. 92.

[4] *MCC Items*, 23Nov64.

[5] CTU 79.3.5 ComdD, 17Oct64–14Jan65.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

Chapter 13

Prelude to Escalation

[1] Westmoreland and Sharp, *Report On The War*, p. 95.

[2] *Youngdale Interview.*

[3] Gravel Edition, *Pentagon Papers*, v. III, p. 289.

[4] Westmoreland and Sharp, *Report On The War*, pp. 95, 97.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Appendix A

USMC and VNMC Senior Officers, 1954-1964

USMC SENIOR MARINE ADVISORS

LtCol Victor J. Croizat	Aug 1954	Jun 1956
LtCol William N. Wilkes, Jr	Jun 1956	Jun 1958
LtCol Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr	Jun 1958	Jun 1960
LtCol Clifford J. Robichaud, Jr	Jun 1960	Aug 1961
LtCol Robert E. Brown	Aug 1961	Oct 1962
LtCol Clarence G. Moody, Jr	Oct 1962	Oct 1963
LtCol Wesley C. Noren	Oct 1963	Sep 1964
Col William P. Nesbit	Sep 1964	

VNMC SENIOR OFFICERS AND COMMANDANTS

Maj Le Quang Trong	1 Oct 1954	17 Jun 1956
Maj Phan Van Lieu	18 Jan 1956	22 Aug 1956
Capt Bui Pho Chi	23 Aug 1956	1 Oct 1956
Maj Le Nhu Hung	2 Oct 1956	23 May 1960
LtCol Le Nguyen Khang	24 May 1960	15 Dec 1963
LtCol Nguyen Ba Lien	16 Dec 1963	Feb 1964
BGen Le Nguyen Khang	Feb 1964	

SHUFLY, SQUADRON, AND SUB UNIT COMMANDERS*

SHUFLY Commanders	*Dates*	
Col John F. Carey	15 Apr 1962	31 Jul 1962
Col Julius W. Ireland	1 Aug 1962	5 Nov 1962
LtCol Alton W. McCully	6 Nov 1962	28 Jan 1963
LtCol Harold F. Brown	29 Jan 1963	17 Jul 1963
Col Andre D. Gomez	18 Jul 1963	14 Jan 1964
Col Robert A. Merchant	16 Jan 1964	9 Jul 1964
Col Hardy Hay	10 Jul 1964	16 Oct 1964
Col John H. King, Jr	17 Oct 1964	

Squadron Commanders	*Squadron*	*Dates*	
LtCol Archie J. Clapp	HMM-362	15 Apr 1962	31 Jul 1962
LtCol Robert L. Rathbun	HMM-163	1 Aug 1962	11 Jan 1963
LtCol Reinhardt Leu	HMM-162	12 Jan 1963	7 Jun 1963
LtCol Frank A. Shook	HMM-261	8 Jun 1963	1 Oct 1963
LtCol Thomas J. Ross	HMM-361	2 Oct 1963	31 Jan 1964
LtCol John H. LaVoy	HMM-364	1 Feb 1964	21 Jun 1964
LtCol Oliver W. Curtis	HMM-162	17 Jun 1964	7 Oct 1964
LtCol Joseph Koler, Jr	HMM-365	8 Oct 1964	

Sub Unit Commanders	*Dates*	
LtCol William W. Eldridge, Jr	15 Apr 1962	3 Aug 1962
LtCol Ralph R. Davis	4 Aug 1962	15 Jan 1963
LtCol George H. Linnemeier	16 Jan 1963	4 Jul 1963
LtCol Earl W. Cassidy	5 Jul 1963	6 Feb 1964
LtCol Samuel G. Beal	7 Feb 1964	26 Jun 1964
Maj Marion R. Green	27 Jun 1964	14 Dec 1964
LtCol Thomas E. Vernon	15 Dec 1964	

*SHUFLY was designated Task Unit 79.3.5 from 15 April 1962 until 6 November 1962; Task Element 79.3.3.6 from 6 November 1962 through 31 December 1964.

Appendix B

Awards and Decorations, Vietnam, through 1964*

Navy Cross

Maj Donald E. Koelper [1]	16 Feb 1964
SSgt John C. Thompson	30 Apr 1964

Navy Distinguished Service Medal

MajGen Richard G. Weede [2]	Feb 1962–May 1964
MajGen Carl A. Youngdale	25 Jan 1964–20 Jul 1965

Silver Star Medal

Maj John R. Braddon	27 Apr 1964
1stLt Phillip O. Brady	31 Dec 1964
Capt Franklin P. Eller, Jr	31 Dec 1964
Capt Joseph N. Smith	27 Oct 1963–25 Apr 1964
Capt Richard B. Taylor [3]	25 Nov 1962–31 Oct 1963

Legion of Merit

Col Earl E. Anderson	8 Jul 1963–15 May 1964
LtCol Earl W. Cassidy	2 Jul 1963–14 Jan 1964
Col John F. Carey [4]	9 Apr 1962–31 Jul 1962
LtCol Archie J. Clapp [5]	15 Apr 1962–31 Jul 1962
Col Andre D. Gomez	19 Jul 1963–14 Jan 1964
Col John H. King, Jr	16 Oct 1964–15 May 1965
LtCol Joseph Koler, Jr	7 Oct 1964–18 Feb 1965
LtCol John H. La Voy	1 Feb 1964–22 Jun 1964
Col Robert A. Merchant	2 Jan 1964–10 Jul 1964
LtCol Clarence C. Moody, Jr	18 Jan 1962–24 Oct 1963
Col Wesley C. Noren	13 Oct 1963–13 Sep 1964
LtCol Thomas J. Ross	1 Oct 1963–31 Jan 1964
Col Roy H. Thompson	27 Feb 1962–16 Jun 1964
Col Charles E. Warren	8 Feb 1962– 9 Jul 1964
Col Edwin B. Wheeler	1 Aug 1964–23 Aug 1965

Distinguished Flying Cross

Maj Albert N. Allen	27 Apr 1964
Capt William J. Burrows	27 Apr 1964
Capt Charles E. Cannon	27 Apr 1964
Capt William Cunningham	27 Apr 1964
1stLt Ronald V. Debrincat	27 Apr 1964
Capt George H. Dunn II	27 Apr 1964
Capt George H. Dunn II	30 Apr 1964
Capt Robert K. Ervi	31 Dec 1963
1stLt Melvin T. Graves	27 Apr 1964
Capt Theodore A. Heister	1 Aug 1963

*Other awards, such as Navy Commendation Medals, Air Medals, and Purple Hearts are not included in this list.
[1] First Navy Cross approved for Vietnam.
[2] First Navy Distinguished Service Medal awarded for Vietnam.
[3] First Silver Star Medal awarded to a Marine for Vietnam.
[4–5] First Legions of Merit awarded to USMC personnel for Vietnam.

Distinguished Flying Cross—Continued

1stLt Donald A. Hodgen [6]	10 Mar 1963–11 Mar 1963
LtCol John H. La Voy	27 Apr 1964
Capt Peter A. Love	27 Apr 1964
WO Dennis T. McKee	27 Apr 1964
1stLt Edward P. Moore	27 Apr 1964
CWO Robert F. Patton	5 Jun 1964
1stLt Thomas H. Peters [7]	9 Mar 1963–10 Mar 1963
Capt Eugene W. Rawlins	27 Apr 1964
Capt Howard G. Taylor	27 Apr 1964
1stLt Charles R. Upshaw	27 Apr 1964
Capt William W. Wamel, Jr	27 Apr 1964
Capt William W. Wamel, Jr	30 Apr 1964
Maj Goodell P. Warren	27 Apr 1964
1stLt Charles C. Wood, Jr	27 Apr 1964
Capt Grant T. Yule	27 Apr 1964

Bronze Star Medal

SSgt John Baran	12 Dec 1964
LtCol Samuel G. Beal	3 Feb 1964– 1 Jul 1964
SSgt Clifford J. Beaver	30 Dec 1964–31 Dec 1964
LtCol George A. Brigham	3 Apr 1964– 3 Jul 1964
SSgt Marvin I. Bryant	12 Oct 1964– 8 Mar 1965
Cpl Clarence L. Chester	30 Jun 1964
Capt Don R. Christensen [8]	28 Sep 1962–31 Jul 1963
2dLt Francis R. Ciccone	16 Oct 1964
SSgt James A. Coryer	30 Jun 1964
Maj Alfred J. Croft	1 Feb 1962– 7 Feb 1964
LtCol Oliver W. Curtis	17 Jun 1964–23 Nov 1964
LtCol Raymond C. Damm	10 May 1964– 1 Dec 1964
Maj Alfred M. Gray, Jr	11 Apr 1964–15 Aug 1964
Capt James J. Harp	10 Mar 1963–11 Mar 1963
Cpl Cary F. Janulewicz	9 Dec 1964
1stLt Weston L. Johnson	10 Nov 1964
2dLt James P. Kelliher	31 Dec 1964
1stLt Donald H. Larson	4 Apr 1964– 1 Feb 1965
GySgt Richard L. Latimer	9 Dec 1964
Capt John P. Monahan	21 Mar 1964–28 Feb 1965
Capt James P. McWilliams	2 May 1963 9 Jun 1964
GySgt Charles D. Peck	14 Apr 1963–22 Apr 1964
LCpl James N. Phinney	10 Apr 1964
LCpl Walter L. Rupp	24 Mar 1964
GySgt Edmund R. Sewell	20 Sep 1964
SSgt Cecil C. Stibbens	Dec 1962– Dec 1964
Capt Edward H. Walsh	28 Sep 1964– 1 May 1964
Maj Charles K. Whitfield	31 Jan 1964–20 Jan 1965
Capt Frank Zimolzak [9]	27 Apr 1962–25 May 1963

[6–7] First Distinguished Flying Crosses approved for USMC personnel in Vietnam.
[8] One of the first two Bronze Star Medals (approved the same date) for USMC personnel in Vietnam.
[9] One of the first two Bronze Star Medals (approved the same date) for USMC personnel in Vietnam.

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Appendix C

Glossary of Acronyms

AHOC	Aviation Headquarters Operations Center
ARVN	Army of The Republic of Vietnam
ASOC	Air Support Operations Center
BLT	Battalion Landing Team
CG	Civil Guard
ChMAAG	Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CinCPac	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CIP	Counter Insurgency Plan
ComUSMACV	Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FEC	French Expeditionary Corps
FMFPac	Fleet Marine Force, Pacific
GCA	Ground Controlled Approach (system)
GVN	Government of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
HMM	Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron
ICC	International Control Commission
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JGS	Joint General Staff (Vietnamese)
JRO	Job Related Orientation (Program)
JTF	Joint Task Force
LSG	Logistics Support Group
MABS	Marine Air Base Squadron
MAG	Marine Aircraft Group
MATCU	Marine Airfield Traffic Control Unit
MAW	Marine Aircraft Wing
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit
MR	Military Region
NLF	National Liberation Front
OJT	On-The-Job Training (Program)
PAVN	Peoples Army of Vietnam
PF	Popular Forces
RF	Regional Forces
RLT	Regimental Landing Team
RSSZ	Rung Sat Special Zone
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAR	Search and Rescue
SDC	Self Defense Corps
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SLF	Special Landing Force
TACAN	Tactical Air Navigation (system)
TAFDS	Tactical Airfield Fuel Dispensing System
TERM	Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission
TRIM	Training Relations Instruction Mission
USMAAG (MAAG)	U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group
USMACThai	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission
VC	Viet Cong
VMGR	Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron
VNA	Vietnamese National Army
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps

Appendix D

Chronology

1954

7 May—French garrison at Dien Bien Phu surrenders to Viet Minh.
16 Jun—Ngo Dinh Diem named premier of Vietnam by French-sponsored emperor, Bao Dai.
20 Jul—French and Viet Minh representatives sign Geneva cease-fire. Vietnam is divided into northern and southern zones pending reunification elections to be held in 1956.
2 Aug—LtCol Victor J. Croizat, USMC, arrives in South Vietnam for duty with USMAAG.
8 Sep—Manila Pact signed by U.S. and seven other nations. Within weeks (Sep 1954) the Manila Pact is transformed into the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).
13 Oct—Premier Diem decrees the establishment of a 1,137-man Marine Corps (VNMC).

1955

Feb—LtCol Croizat becomes first advisor to VNMC.
Apr—Sect rebellion threatens to topple the Diem government. Marine Landing Battalion deploys to the Mekong Delta.
31 May—Diem names Major Le Quang Trong as Senior Marine Officer of VNMC.
Sep—Two USMC advisors, a captain and a technical sergeant, are assigned to the USMAAG, Vietnam, for duty with the VNMC.
23 Oct—Premier Diem receives 98 percent of South Vietnamese vote during a national referendum in which he was opposed by Bao Dai.
26 Oct—Ngo Dinh Diem proclaims the Republic of Vietnam and becomes the republic's first president.

1956

18 Jan—Diem appoints Major Phan Van Lieu as Senior Officer of VNMC.
Feb—Marine Landing Battalion returns to garrison at Nha Trang. VNMC reorganized into two landing battalions, a 4.2-inch mortar company, and a small headquarters.
Jun—LtCol William N. Wilkes, Jr., replaces LtCol Croizat as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.
Jul—Election deadline for reunification of northern and southern zones passes without serious incident.
Aug—Diem appoints Captain Bui Pho Chi as Senior Officer of VNMC.
Oct—Diem appoints Major Le Nhu Hung as Senior Officer of VNMC.
Nov—LtGen Samuel T. Williams, USA, relieves LtGen John O'Daniel as Chief USMAAG, Vietnam.

1958

Jun—LtCol Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr., relieves LtCol Wilkes as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.

1959

May—1st VNMC Landing Battalion conducts operations against Viet Cong in An Xuyen Province while 2d Landing Battalion conducts similar operation against Communist guerrillas in Vinh Binh Province.
1 Jun—The VNMC is expanded to a Marine Corps Group of 2,276 officers and men. A 3d Landing Battalion is formed and the battalions are reorganized into four infantry companies.

1960

Jun—LtCol Clifford J. Robichaud, Jr., relieves LtCol Wilkinson as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.
Sep—LtGen Lionel C. McGarr, USA, relieves LtGen Williams as Chief USMAAG, Vietnam.
11 Nov—An abortive attempt by ARVN paratroops and two Marine companies to overthrow the Diem Government.
20 Dec—The Communist "National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam" was formed.

1961

May—On The Job Training (OJT) program for USMC junior officers and staff noncommissioned officers is initiated. Thereafter, 20 Marines per month enter Vietnam to observe operations.
16 May—A 14 nation conference on the deteriorating Laotian situation convenes at Geneva.
Jul—VNMC again reorganized and expanded. The addition of a fourth infantry battalion and a 75mm pack howitzer battery raises the strength of the VNMC to 3,321.
Aug—LtCol Robert E. Brown relieves LtCol Robichaud as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.
Aug—VNMC battalion conducts operations in the inundated U Minh Forest region of the Ca Mau Peninsula.
Nov—General Maxwell D. Taylor, USA (ret.), President Kennedy's special military advisor, visits South Vietnam on fact-finding mission.
11 Dec—The first direct support contingent of U.S. military forces arrives in Vietnam—400 Army Troops and two helicopter companies.
Dec—USMAAG approves plan for new 18-man Marine Advisory Division.

1962

1 Jan—VNMC expanded to 6,109 officers and men, and redesignated the Vietnamese Marine Brigade. A new amphibious support battalion is formed.
3 Jan—First element of USAF transport aircraft arrive in South Vietnam to support government forces.
Jan—Detachment A, 1st Radio Company, FMF arrives in Vietnam for duty with Army communications unit.
20 Jan—CinCPac authorizes all MAAG advisors to accompany their Vietnamese units into combat.

3 Feb—President Diem issues decree formalizing initiation of the Strategic Hamlet Program.
8 Feb—U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) activated in Saigon with General Paul D. Harkins as commander. MajGen Richard G. Weede, USMC, becomes MACV's first chief of staff.
7 Feb—Vietnamese Air Force fighters bomb and strafe the Presidential Palace in Saigon but fail to injure President Diem.
9 Apr—The leading elements of Marine Task Unit 79.3.5 (SHUFLY), commanded by Col John F. Carey, arrive at Soc Trang, Republic of Vietnam.
15 Apr—HMM–362 (Reinforced), a Marine medium transport helicopter squadron, arrives at Soc Trang to begin operations in support of government forces.
22 Apr—HMM–362 helicopters fly their first combat support missions in Vietnam.
9 May—Eight Marine helicopters hit by small arms fire during landing on Ca Mau Peninsula.
18 May—The 3d Marine Expeditionary Unit (3d MEU) began moving into position at Udorn, Thailand, in response to the deteriorating situation in Laos. The 3d MEU was part of Joint Task Force 116, organized for use in the mounting crisis.
20 May—BGen Ormond R. Simpson assumes command of 3d MEU.
18 Jun—Eagle Flight first employed in combat by Marine helicopters operating from Soc Trang.
25 Jun—HMM–162 replaces HMM–261 at Udorn as 3d MEW (MEB) helicopter element.
1 Jul—First Marine Combat units withdraw from Udorn, Thailand, as a display of good faith.
23 Jul—An agreement guaranteeing the neutrality of Laos is signed by the U.S., the Soviet Union, Communist China, North Vietnam, and 10 other nations at Geneva.
30 Jul—Col Julius W. Ireland relieves Col Carey as SHUFLY commander.
31 Jul—Last Marine combat units withdrawn from Udorn, Thailand.
1 Aug—HMM–163 replaces HMM–362 as operational squadron assigned to SHUFLY.
Aug—First machine guns mounted on Marine helicopters operating in Vietnam.
4 Sep—Initial SHUFLY elements begin displacing to Da Nang in I Corps Tactical Zone.
18 Sep—HMM–163 conducts first combat operations in I Corps.
20 Sep—All SHUFLY elements are in place at Da Nang.
Oct—LtCol Clarence G. Moody relieves LtCol Brown as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.
6 Oct—Five Marines and two U.S. Navy personnel killed in HUS crash near Tam Ky.
7 Nov—HMM–163 executes first tiger flight reaction force mission in I Corps.
Nov—All Marine Corps aircraft redesignated.
6 Nov—Marine Task Unit (SHUFLY) redesignated Task Element 79.3.3.6.
6 Nov—LtCol Alton W. McCully assumes command of SHUFLY.
Dec—Vietnamese Joint General Staff realigns South Vietnam's Corps Tactical Zones, creating a fourth CTZ and a Capital Military District.

1963

11 Jan—HMM–162 replaces HMM–163 as SHUFLY's operational squadron.
19 Jan—HMM–162 conducts its first combat troop lift in Vietnam.
10–13 Mar—HMM–162 helicopters participate in search and rescue attempts for U.S. Army OV–1 Mohawk and crew. Two Marine helicopters crash in high mountains of northern II Corps.
13 Apr—Marine transport helicopters conduct first operation with U.S. Army UH–1B armed helicopters.
Apr—Organization of Marine Advisory Division modified slightly.
1 May—Provisional Marine Brigade joins ARVN forces for operation in Do Xa base area.
8 Jun—HMM–261 replaces HMM–162 as SHUFLY's operational squadron.
15–16 Aug—HMM–261 helilifts 2d ARVN Division units from field to culminate operation LAM SON XII.
21 Aug—Vietnamese National Police raid Buddhist pagodas throughout South Vietnam.
Sep—LtCol Wesley C. Noren relieves LtCol Moody as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.
2 Oct—HMM–361 replaces HMM–261 as SHUFLY's operational squadron.
Oct—Provisional Marine Regiment conducts operation PHI–HOA 5 in Gia Dinh Province.
1 Nov—Diem government overthrown by coup of military leaders. Diem and brother Ngo Dinh Nhu assassinated.
14 Nov—Provisional Marine Regiment launches Operation DAI–PHONG 28 and 29 in III Corps Tactical Zone.
25 Nov—2d VNMC Battalion participates in Operation DAI–PHONG 30.
16 Dec—LtCol Khang relieved as Commandant of Vietnamese Marine Corps. Replaced by LtCol Nguyen Ba Lien.

1964

1 Jan—General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., relieves General David Shoup as Commandant of U.S. Marine Corps.
Jan—General Greene visits Vietnam.
15 Jan—BGen Carl A. Youngdale, USMC, becomes MACV Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (J–2).
1 Feb—HMM–364 replaces HMM–361 as SHUFLY's operational squadron.
Feb—Col Khang recalled from Philippines and relieves LtCol Lien as Commandant of VNMC.
Mar—LtGen Victor H. Krulak relieves LtGen Carson A. Roberts as Commanding General, FMFPac.
27 Apr—HMM–364 participates in Operation SURE WIND 202 in northern II Corps.
May—MajGen Weede, USMC, relieved as MACV Chief of Staff.
15 May—USMAAG abolished. Marine Advisory Division renamed Marine Advisory Unit and placed under Naval Advisory Group, MACV.
20 May—Marine Advisory Team One arrives at Da Nang.
7 Jun—Two Marines from SHUFLY compound reported missing south of Da Nang.
13 Jun—Advisory Team One moves to Tiger Tooth Mountain in northwestern I Corps.
19 Jun—HMM–364 turn over helicopters and maintenance equipment to VNAF 217th Squadron.
21 Jun—HMM–162 replaces HMM–364 as SHUFLY's operational squadron.
Jul—Vietnamese Marine Recruit Training Center opens at Thu Duc. VNMC expanded with the creation of a fifth infantry battalion.
7 Jul—HMM–162 participates in relief of Nam Dong Special Forces Camp.

1964—Continued

2–5 Aug—North Vietnamese patrol boats and U.S. ships clash in Tonkin Gulf.

6 Aug—U.S. Congress passes Tonkin Gulf resolution.

11 Aug—President Johnson signs the so-called Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

19 Aug—Advisory Team One moves to Bach Ma and continues operations.

4 Sep—Col William P. Nesbit replaces Col Noren as Senior Marine Advisor to VNMC.

13 Sep—Advisory Team One dissolved, departs Vietnam.

14 Sep—SHUFLY aircraft flown to safety in face of severe tropical storm.

Sep—Marine Advisory Unit reorganized and expanded.

8 Oct—HMM–365 replaces HMM–364 as SHUFLY's operational squadron.

Oct—Marine reconnaissance element conducts survey of Cam Ranh Bay in southern II Corps.

31 Dec—Viet Cong terrorist bomb American BOQ in Saigon.

31 Dec—4th VNMC Battalion defeated at Binh Gia in III Corps.

Appendix E

List of Reviewers

General Officers

Gen Earl E. Anderson, USMC
Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., USMC (Ret.)
Gen David M. Shoup, USMC (Ret.)
LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC (Ret.)
LtGen Herman Nickerson, Jr., USMC (Ret.)
LtGen Carson A. Roberts, USMC (Ret.)
LtGen Ormond R. Simpson, USMC (Ret.)
LtGen Richard G. Weede, USMC, (Ret.)
MajGen Norman Anderson, USMC (Ret.)
MajGen Paul J. Fontana, USMC (Ret.)
MajGen Charles J. Timmes, U.S. Army (Ret.)
MajGen Donald M. Weller, USMC, (Ret.)
MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, USMC (Ret.)
BGen Joseph Koler, Jr., USMC

Colonels

Col Frederick S. Aldridge, USMC (Ret.)
Col Samual Beal, USMC (Ret.)
Col John T. Breckinridge, USMC
Col Harold F. Brown, USMC (Ret.)
Col John F. Carey, USMC (Ret.)
Col Archie J. Clapp, USMC (Ret.)
Col Alfred J. Croft, USMC
Col Victor J. Croizat, USMC (Ret.)
Col Oliver W. Curtis, USMC (Ret.)
Col Raymond C. Damm, USMC
Col Andre Gomez, USMC (Ret.)
Col Hardy Hay, USMC (Ret.)
Col Julius W. Ireland, USMC (Ret.)
Col John H. La Voy, USMC (Ret.)
Col Reinhardt Leu, USMC (Ret.)
Col Robert A. Merchant, USMC (Ret.)
Col Ross S. Mickey, USMC (Ret.)
Col Clarence G. Moody, Jr., USMC
Col William P. Nesbit, USMC (Ret.)
Col Wesley C. Noren, USMC (Ret.)
Col Robert L. Rathbum, USMC (Ret.)
Col Thomas J. Ross, USMC (Ret.)
Col Clifford J. Robichaud, Jr., USMC (Ret.)
Col Frank R. Wilkinson, Jr., USMC (Ret.)

Lieutenant Colonels

LtCol Robert E. Brown, USMC (Ret.)
LtCol Earl W. Cassidy, USMC (Ret.)
LtCol Michael J. Gott, USMC
LtCol George H. Linnemeier, USMC (Ret.)
LtCol James P. McWilliams, USMC
LtCol Joseph N. Smith, USMC

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